Mike Conner: East of the Moon

Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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Marc Laidlaw

Paul Di Filippo

Jerry Oltion

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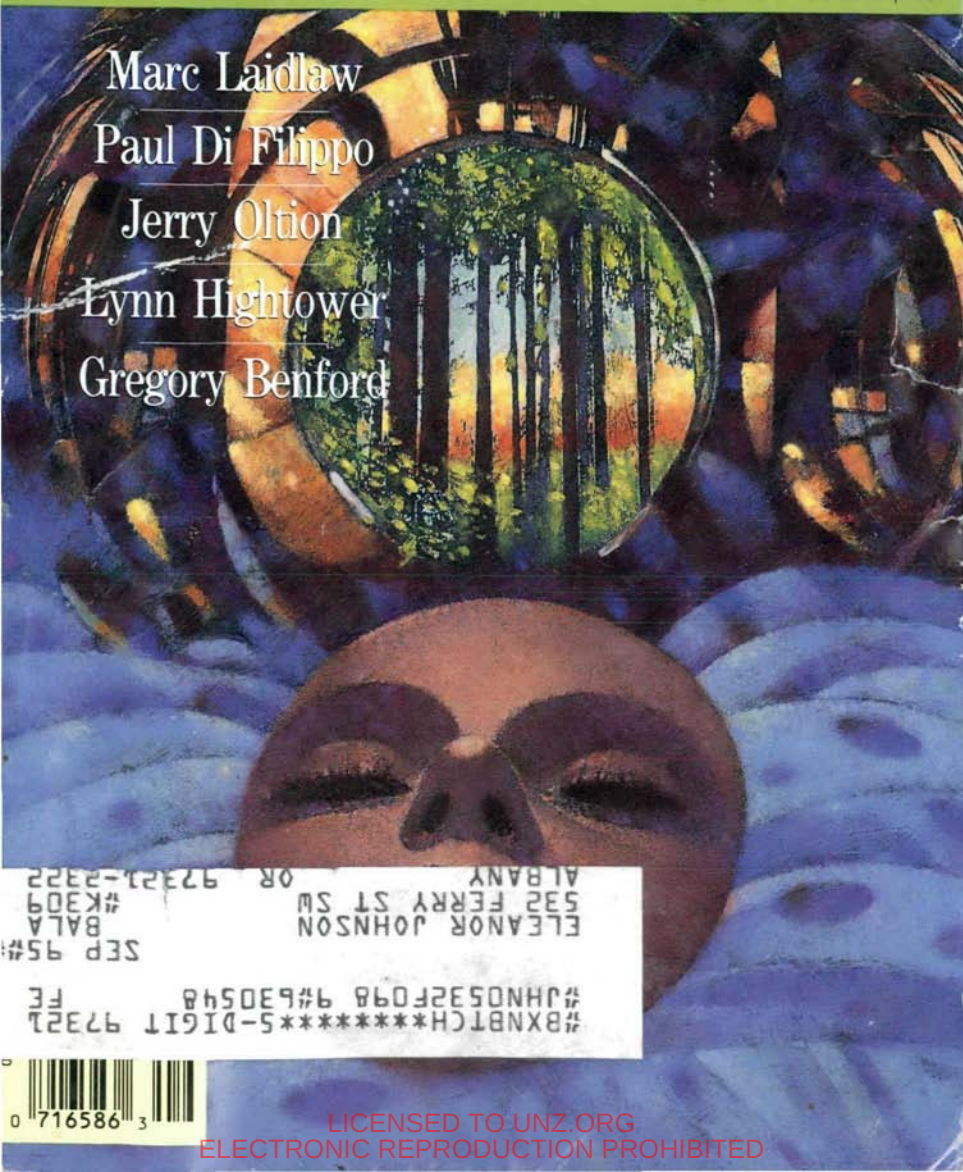

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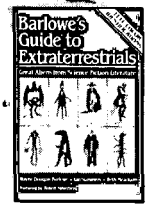

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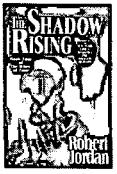

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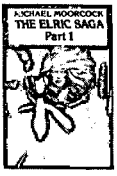

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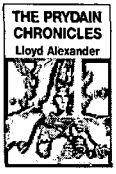

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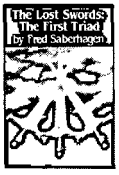

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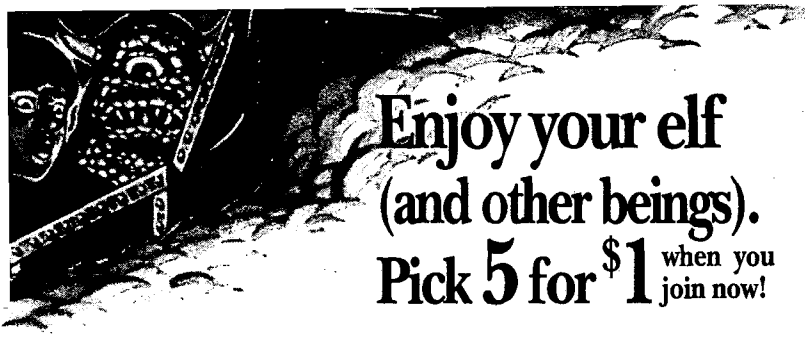

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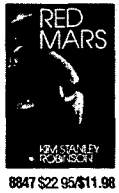

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AVRAM DAVIDSON: 1923-1993

AVRAM DAVIDSON, who died on May 9, 1993, was editor of *F&SF* from 1962 to 1965. In those days he visited our New York office for a weekly conference, which for me was an occasion of great entertainment and education. Avram was a short, stout man with a rabbinical beard. He was like his stories in many ways, an offbeat, scholarly man of great wit and gentleness.

F&SF was his first editing job, but he took to it effortlessly, and his story introductions were a marvel. Avram moved to Mexico during his final year as editor and handled this long-distance affair with calm and efficiency, despite the fact that these were days before faxes and FedEx; in fact there was only one phone in the small town where he lived. I don't recall any missed deadlines, though he once claimed that a missing manuscript was eaten by an iguana.

His first story, "My Boy Friend's Name Is Jello," appeared in *F&SF* in 1954, and although he wrote several novels (including *Rogue Dragon* and *The Phoenix and the Mirror*), his career was notable for its wonderful and distinctive short fiction, most of it published here and later collected in *Or All the Seas With Oysters* (1962) and *What Strange Stars and Skies* (1965).

In "An Approach to Style," E.B. White wrote: "The whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one. Let him start sniffing the air, or glancing at the Trend Machine, and he is as good as dead, though he may make a nice living."

Avram probably carried this virtue to an extreme. He never made a nice living. But he found an appreciative, if small, audience, and of one thing there was never any doubt: he was a true writer.

—Ed Ferman

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction

SEPTEMBER • 44th Year of Publication

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Two of F&SF*'s more popular writers, Marc Laidlaw and Paul Di Filippo, have combined their talents to produce "Sleep is Where You Find It." The story features the photographer Weegee. Marc has written about photographers before, most notably "The Glamour of Diane Arbus in Her Bath," which just appeared in* Omni. *He writes, "I got stuck in a dead-end trying to write about Weegee. I invited Paul to see if he could find a way to free up the story — a great decision, as it turns out."*

The two of them are now collaborating on a fantasy novel on the same theme called The Secret World of Photographs.

Sleep Is Where You Find It

By Marc Laidlaw & Paul Di Filippo

One
Sunday Morning in Manhattan

DOWN IN THE LINCOLN TUNnel, alone with his headlamps and the dashboard's glow, he hears a voice and thinks for one second that it's the police dispatcher: "Tonight's the night," it says, a tiny little voice.

Weegee scowls to himself and answers back, "What do you know? Tonight's always the night."

But the radio is mute, really. Under the river there's hardly even static. He looks around and discovers a girl fading in like another station, her own signal getting stronger and brighter as he nears the end of the tunnel. For a lingering moment she's nothing but a silvery glow condensing out of darkness, pure potential, and then suddenly she's flesh, sitting half-naked on the fabric-covered seat, her grimy right elbow on the passenger's armrest.

Not bad, Weegee thinks to himself. *The Darkroom's being*

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nice to me tonight.

He's used to far worse, and it's hard not to squirm when he thinks of all the things that have appeared next to him on other occasions, messing up the seat covers. The Mob hits that insist on talking with half their faces blown away; the weary-looking accident victims, stanching bloody noses; the roasts, with their skin so crisp and blackened that it crackles as they reach out wistfully for a puff off his cigar. Why they hound him, Weegee doesn't know. It's as if they consider him responsible somehow. But then this whole nighttime city, and everyone in it, has a haunted look.

It's a relief not to share his car with something that makes him want to puke or scream or bawl his eyes out; but even so, Weegee has made it a matter of principle not to speak to the spooks. With the worst of them, he stops at the mouth of the tunnel and makes them get out and walk...or crawl. But tonight — well, he's tempted. Strongly tempted.

The kid must be about twelve. Glossy black hair pulled back with a Li'l Orphan Annie clip to reveal the delicate whorls of one perfect ear. Rosy lips and dark eyes, slightly Spic or Portagee features. She wears only a black skirt and incredibly filthy white bobby-sox. In her lap, she's got a gray tiger kitten gripped so tightly by its throat that the creature can't even mew.

Her adolescent breasts are obviously new as a Brooklyn dawn and twice as pretty — not to mention almost as rare a sight to Weegee. The nipples are pink as frosting flowers on a birthday cake, so pink —

Weegee tears his eyes off the girl's chest and puts them back on the road. The end of the Lincoln Tunnel has appeared ahead, although out there is only another order of darkness.

Now he recognizes her — remembers where he caught her. He hasn't thought of her in...how long? It was a sweltering summer night, and leaning from his tenement window you could see, all up and down the side of the building, whole families out sleeping on their fire escapes. He'd spotted her by the faint light from the street, the oldest of nearly a dozen kids sprawled on the bars below. A brief flash from his camera, the secret glow of infrared, and he pulled back inside to develop the image and study it in secret. He could still remember the voyeur's thrill on discovering that she was almost naked, an innocent bud cloistered in the safe darkness, never knowing he'd been watching. He had never been quite sure how he felt about that —

That's why she's come for him, isn't it?

She's an unresolved tension, a fragment of undigested guilt, in her way

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more troubling than the corpses.

He has seen girls her age hooking, sure. The places he goes, you see everything after a while. But in his mind, in his photographs, he'd always thought of the girl as kept safe somehow, fixed in that innocent moment, protected not only by the other children but by his photography, as if the infrared flash were an angel's halo hanging over her.

Obviously she isn't safe anymore. She'd slipped down from that fire escape, unknit herself from the limbs of her brothers and sisters, and found her way to him in the darkness, in the tunnel, where everything found him eventually, each with its fresh burden of unwelcome thoughts, its chain of unsavory associations....

She's only a girl, but she reminds him of a woman — reminds him of all sorts of things he can never really have, thanks to the camera.

When was the last time I had a woman, one I didn't have to buy like a dancehall hostess? Weegee asks himself. *Can't get close to one with this damned camera always in front of my face, hanging at my hip, keeping me up all night without sleep....*

Weegee shakes himself out of his self-pity. Aloud — he's a talker, Weegee, loves to talk to anyone, high or low, young or old, and in a pinch his own forlorn forty-five-year-old self will do — Weegee says, "Oh, shut up, you rummy old bastard. If you wanna cry, go buy yourself one of those heartbreak pillows at Lewis and Conger's, fer chrissakes."

He looks reproachfully at his warped reflection in the windshield. The cigar ember flares orange in the corner of his distorted mouth. Out of the corner of his right eye, he sees the girl coolly watching him, saying nothing.

As he drives from the gas-fumed tunnel and out under streetlamps again, both car speakers kick in at full volume, a loony Rossini overture tinkling from one while the other crackles with the police dispatcher's voice. (It's illegal for the average citizen to have one of these rigs in his jalopy. But Weegee has special dispensation from the police, who always welcome the '38 Chevy coupe with license plates 57-28-Y, its trunk stuffed full with cigars, film, flashbulbs, flashlights, a pair of fireman's hipboots, disguises, even a typewriter and a ream of paper, for quick captioning of photos, notation of who, what, and where, of disaster, death, and — too rarely — laughter.)

The dashboard clock says one minute past midnight, but for Weegee the night is just beginning.

Neon light from a hundred signs — HORSEFLESH SOLD HERE; ROOMS

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35 CENTS & UP; TROMMER'S WHITE LABEL — slides liquidly up the maroon hood of the big car. A salami rolls across the seat as he takes a corner. He wolfs down an oily slice of meat he's slightly surprised to find in the fingers of his free hand. He can't remember cutting it. Can't, in fact, remember where he was headed before the tunnel. Consciousness is fragmentary, a sign of exhaustion. When was the last time he slept? He tells everyone — himself included — that he sleeps in the day, but when was it ever day?

Weegee wipes his greasy fingers on a wad of teletype notes that poke from his jacket pocket like a stiff handkerchief. Idly, pointedly ignoring the girl, he uncrinkles the sheets, holds them up at eye-level, so he can still scan the street.

They're blank, except for salami grease.

"What's this, Mister?"

The girl's voice startles him. It's the voice that had said, "Tonight's the night."

Weegee looks to where she's pointing.

It's the camera resting on the seat between them.

Always between him and everyone else.

Two
Camera Tips

THE CAMERA is a 4x5 Speed Graphic with a Kodak Ektar lens in a Supermatic shutter, all American made. The film inside is Super Pancro Press Type B. A flash bulb is always used, since most pictures are taken at night. But even when shots are made by daylight, the flash is still used. A Graflex flash synchronizer is employed. Exposure is always the same: 1/200 part of a second, stop f/16. That is, at a distance of ten feet. At six feet, it may be stepped down to f/32. Focusing is always at either ten or six feet.

There is no time for anything else on a story.

Three
The Curious Ones

The girl releases her cat's neck, her hands still arched around its belly,

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ready to grab. The animal inches forward to sniff the camera.

Ignoring her question, which lingers in the air like a prostitute's recriminatory perfume, Weegee continues to drive down Forty-second Street, past crowds outside theaters and bars, idlers and gawkers, lovers and fighters, musicians and sailors, the people of a sleepless New York poised on the precipice of another Sunday morning hangover. He's wondering just how seriously he'll have to take this phantom.

It's a slow night, though still early. Weegee is jumpy, anxious for distraction, despite the fact that something always happens, and he always turns up just in time to capture it. It's the girl making him nervous, isn't it? He reaches forward and twiddles the Rossini to soften it slightly; turns up the police radio, alert to any news that might concern him. The radio gives out a soft babble, like the voice of a crowd, teasing him with the sense of speech but no actual words. But he rarely needs the police; he gets his instructions from somewhere else.

The car slides over the streets like the planchette on a grimy Ouija board, spelling out clues he's too close to read, rolling over letters in ripped-up broadsides, smashing the labels on bottles and cans; ghost fingers move him this way and that, from "Hello" to "Good-bye." Sometimes he thinks that if he takes his hands off the wheel, the car will keep driving — taking him to another crime's aftermath, another dark scene that is his alone to illuminate. Something is coming — something developing in this Darkroom the size of Manhattan. He's at the mercy of forces that make him feel small and alone. Ghost fingers tickle the back of his neck —

But it's the kitten's whiskers. The creature comes crawling over the back of the seat, hunting for the salami. Instinctively he reaches for the camera, pulling it toward him, as if the cat had any interest in it.

"Where did you get it?"

Against his better judgment, Weegee answers her question with another.

"Get what?"

"The camera."

The question makes no sense. He's always had the camera. There was never a time without it, this appendage vital as his hand, foot, or balls. So baffled is Weegee that all he can do is repeat her last words.

"The camera?"

The girl unselfconsciously lifts one arm and scratches her downy pit. The breast on that side flattens, the pink nipple rising slightly up her ribcage.

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The kid yawns, and Weegee thinks, *Kinda late for her to be up. Kids need their sleep....*

Finished with her yawn, she says, "You don't remember, do you?" Here." She reaches out and touches his face.

Spirit fingers, driving him....

FOUR
HARLEM

Arthur Fellig dozes one night under newspapers in Bryant Park, behind the library. It's his favorite midtown spot. Normally, the cops don't bother anyone flopping here. But tonight is different. Fellig is rousted by a nightstick-wielding bull who sends him and all the other homeless bums out to wander the sidewalks of this gay and heartless burg.

The night before last, he was in the Municipal Lodging House down in the Bowery. Five nickels a night, but he ran out of nickels. On the way out, he noticed for the first time the big sign posted over the desk.

DEPOSIT CASH
AND VALUABLES
— WITH THE —
CASHIER
BEFORE GOING DOWNSTAIRS

Fellig began to laugh insanely, till tears coursed his stubbled cheeks. "Cash!" he choked. "Valuables!" He imagined a wall-safe full of pocket lint and bottlecaps.

Now, heading uptown, bracing himself against the winter winds, Fellig feels like ratshit. His stomach is gnawing itself, his mouth tastes like sour apple wine, his feet — inside shoes whose soles flap with each step — are starting to burn. He has no prospects, no skills, no friends.

He's standing outside a furniture store window. The sight of a bed with white sheets is almost enough to drive him crazy. It looks like the most desirable thing in the world.

Tearing himself away, he strides madly off, bumping solid citizens

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without concern.

He finds himself at the Hudson. The waters look as inviting as a woman's spread legs. Fellig pictures himself jumping, the splash —

Just then, a squad car cruises by, inserting its unwelcome presence into his morbid fantasy. The cop hears the splash...he jumps out, takes off his hat, his coat, his shoes, then his pants, which he rolls up in a bundle to hide and also protect his gun...places all of them on the edge of the pier...and jumps into the icy water in his shirt and underwear, cursing. After a rescue the cop always has to take the trip to the hospital along with the would-be suicide to get thawed out...they have equally good chances of catching pneumonia.

"Move along, buddy."

Fellig pushes on, heading north along the West Side.

At 127th Street, he turns east.

He's in Harlem now.

Fellig's always gotten along good with coloreds. He's got no beef against them. Discrimination seems so stupid and ugly to him. They're all human, ain't they? They all can laugh, all can cry.

He wonders, *But can they sleep?*

He feels a little more at ease up here. The people around him seem content somehow, despite a grinding poverty almost as bad as his. Fellig's spirits lift a bit. Might be a chance of a handout somewhere here....

Fellig passes a church. A huge banner reads:

AFTER DEATH — WHAT?
REVIVAL MEETING

He hits Lenox Avenue, stopped short by a store at the corner.

(ALLEGED)
YOGI AND PROF. NIGER
ALL HINDU COSMETICS, OILS AND INCENSE
6TH AND 7TH BOOKS OF MOSES — LODESTONES — DREAM BOOKS
SPIRITUAL ADVISER — RELIGIOUS ARTICLES — 7 KEYS OF POWER

It's the "alleged" that piques Fellig enough to make him enter, tickles the

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ragged remnants of his sense of humor.

There's a rack of colorful pulp-paper dream-interpretation books. Many shelves hold two-quart Mason jars with handwritten labels: Hindu Commanding Incense, Hindu Magnet Incense, Hindu Conqueror Root.... Tinted apothecary bottles are filled with any-color liquids. A framed portrait of a turbaned swami hangs next to one of Father Divine.

The black man behind the counter sports a crop of white hair beneath his tasseled fez, but his thin mustache is still dark as coal. His large nose supports a pair of pince-nez glasses.

"How may I help you, son?" asks the proprietor in a serious, resonant voice.

Fellig flips a thumb up and back, indicating not the punched-tin ceiling but a spot outside, above the door.

"You the 'alleged' Professor Niger?"

The black man lets out a booming laugh. "At your service. And you must be the 'alleged' Weegee. I'd know your face anywhere."

Fellig takes a step backward. The name sounds familiar, but in a way that frightens him. A long-buried memory nudges its way to the surface, floating up from a grave of old newspapers, broken tarmac and worn-out tires.

(Small fingers brush his cheek...come out tonight, come out...remember...!)

"My name's Fellig," he says sharply.

Niger narrows his eyes and reaches under the counter. For a minute Fellig thinks he may be going for a gun; he tenses, backing off, spreading his hands to show he means no harm.

"Then this isn't yours?"

The Professor lays a camera on the counter. Fellig stares. Almost remembering. Before the nights of rambling, before the drunken sleepless bouts of twisting on pews in the Bowery Allnight Mission, there was another time. Another name....

And a camera. This camera.

His?

His attention is caught in the burnished aluminum reflector that surrounds the empty socket where the flashbulb will fit. All the meager light in the store suddenly seems concentrated in the polished bowl, with his warped reflection at the center instead of a bulb. Fellig is blinded, as if he had been staring at the sun, as if the nonexistent bulb had just gone off in his face.

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When he recovers his eyesight, all is as before.

Except that his hunger and aches are gone.

How had he ever forgotten? How had he spent all this time wandering in a dark city? When had they become separated?

"Got any money on you, son?"

He checks his pockets, wondering if there's anything else he might have forgotten. But they're empty. He shakes his head.

"Shee-it. Well, I promised to hold this till you come for it, without no word of no payment, so I 'spect you can have it anyhow."

Professor Niger pushes it toward him, across the counter. He reaches for it — hesitant, wondering how much more he can remember.

"Take it, alleged Weegee."

"My name's Fellig," he mumbles, voicing his last doubts; but as soon as he touches the camera he knows that's not true anymore. All doubt is gone.

He's Weegee now.

Carrying his moments of split-second light forever through the city of never-ending night.

Five
Psychic Photography

The camera takes the pictures.

The camera *makes* the pictures.

Weegee is convinced of this.

Whatever it is, wherever it came from, whether crafted by hands angelic or satanic, the Speed Graphic is more than just metal and glass. It, not he, is the doer, the actor, the Prime Mover. Weegee is only the instrument, the vessel, the driver and hustler who delivers the camera to its chosen sites; his hands cradle but cannot even be said really to point the thing.

Without the camera's presence, the incidents he "photographs" might never happen, or would happen differently.

It is a heavy burden, especially when he considers all the death he has photographed.

Death. He is known for death, yet death is only part of what he knows. Can't the camera see there's more to life than its climax — must be more!

The shots of lovers on the beach, the children sleeping peacefully on the tenement fire-escapes, the happy barflies and lushes, the hot jazzmen, the

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Village artists and their free-spirited babes, the nurse pushing a carriage, the baker delivering bagels —

Weegee weighs all these shots against the others, the charred corpses, the burning buildings, the gut-shot crooks, the suicides with brains blown out, the hit-and-run victims, the drowned secretaries, the murdered bocce ball player, the crushed stampede victims —

Which way does the balance tip? He's afraid he knows.

If Weegee has any training in photography, he can't remember it. And it would be irrelevant. The camera knows what it needs. He suspects that even his primitive alteration of the aperture makes no difference.

Yet he continues to put his eye to the viewfinder, as if it might take him somewhere — show him a way out of the darkness.

And it's always dark in there, always a vagueness and a seethe of unstoppable motion and form, until suddenly he senses the flash quivering, the lens lusting. At this point, Weegee becomes one with the camera. He has learned to estimate the forms of darkness, a kind of divination prior to the fulfillment of the flash. A struggle of forms, a tangle of shadows. He moves toward the heart of it, waiting until the sounds and movements reach such a peak that he knows he's at the center of the blackest moment. And then, his one (perhaps needless) contribution, he thrusts the camera into the formless sprawl and tries to press the already self-descending button. Too late. There it is, the unchangeable result of his photography, limned in the unforgiving light, a revelation to him as much as anyone. The most fleeting possible light, yet the subject's fate has been fixed forever.

Often he doesn't know what he's seen until later, after development. And then he feels the guilt — or, more rarely, the joy — attendant on aiding the scene's real creator. For he is at best a collaborator, along with darkness, light, and above all else the camera. His flash has created the moment by isolating it — a moment that might have gone another way, been forever lost in the rush of time and in the dark, its syrupy edges blending in with the rest of the night, as if it had no special value save that which he gave it.

Even the seemingly neutral shots — a stack of newspapers on the sidewalk; a car covered in snow, its lines resembling a woman's haunches; his favorite skyscraper, Sixty Wall Street Tower, hanging at the lingering edge of a dawn that never comes — press down on his conscience, as if by putting them on film he has ineluctably tampered with their true selves.

Once he set the Speed Graphic down on the bar at Sammy's, needing both

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hands to pick up an overstuffed ham on rye from the free dinner platter. He turned to find Sammy joshingly aiming the camera at him.

Sammy, bearing no grudge, poured drinks for the next month with a splinted forefinger.

SIX
SUDDEN DEATH

THE GIRL eyes Weegee with a look he's seen before. It's the look a high-society dame lays on her diamonds, the one a gal at Coney Island gives the boyfriend who just managed to win her a stuffed owl; it's the look a Death Row hood turns on the electric chair at Sing Sing. A look of total possession and absorption, subject and object merging into one, fatalistic but underpinned with dread.

Dread of the inevitable loss time brings: loss of the boodle, the boyfriend — specifically, of life.

"You remember now?" says the girl. Ribs of light and shadow slide across her face like the bars of a portable prison.

"Yeah, I remember."

The girl pets her cat thoughtfully, no longer regarding him. Weegee takes the opportunity to ask, "So — what's your story?"

"It's part of yours."

He expects a mischievous smile, but she looks serious, even grim.

"I mean, what's your name?"

"Tara."

"Like *Gone with the Wind*, huh?"

"No."

Before Weegee can question Tara further, the police radio dispatcher, speaking plainly for the moment, broadcasts the code for the discovery of a fresh stiff (Weegee knows all the codes), along with an address down in the Bowery.

Luckily, Times Square lies just ahead, bright as the shine on a salesman's shoes. Weegee whips the big Chevy onto Broadway in a screech of tires and roars off downtown.

The lights and traffic are all with him. The other cars seem to give way around him, letting him pass, knowing he has pressing business, as if he were

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a cop car with siren wailing. He's never had a run quite like this, and he's had doozies. His car melts away hindrances like Sinatra mows down teenagers.

It seems like only seconds before he's nudging the curb with his wheels, nosing in behind two cop cars. He bolts out of the Chevy, camera in hand.

The corpse lies on the granite sidewalk, in a pool of congealing gutter-bound blood. A cane he'll never need again waits patiently by his limp hand. The corpse is conveniently situated in front of a meat store. The fire escape above the store is draped with an NRA banner:

TIME IS SHORT
EVERY MINUTE COUNTS

There's a crowd of spectators — there's always a crowd of spectators — held back by cops. Weegee recognizes several flatfoots.

"O'Malley, Johnson — how about letting me through?"

"Sure thing, Weegee."

Somehow, Weegee senses that Tara's trailing along behind him. The cops make no move to stop her.

When Weegee breaks through into the charmed circle, he spots the corpse.

He's seen him somewhere before, another shabby figure roaming the streets, at the edge of the crowds, maybe watching a fire or bumming change. So familiar is the dead man that Weegee even imagines he's some former public figure fallen from favor, some guy who once towered on the courthouse steps years ago, but has long since been consigned to a wino's belly-dragging existence.

But then the sight of some of the man's spilled wares fixes his ID.

It's Tobacco Jack, the pencil-seller. The chaw that gave him his nickname now contributes a brown runnel out of the corner of Jack's slack lips to the larger flow of blood.

Weegee's attention is suddenly drawn to half a dozen pencils still poking from the inner pocket of Jack's coat. Their erasers are a shiny pink, brand-new, so unlike the weather-scoured, blood-dappled gangrenous gray of Jack's own flesh —

The camera is tugging at his arm, insistent. Shaking himself, Weegee tries to move in closer, thrusting aside all memories of Jack as a once-living individual, now eager only to get the demanded shot.

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A sergeant shoves him back. "Not this one, Weegee. Detective Trevino don't want no press on this one."

"Whadda ya mean?" demands Weegee. "It's just another bum murdered for his spare change.... Ain't it?"

An ambulance has arrived. Stretcher-bearers are now approaching the corpse, along with a useless priest from the parish church that towers across the street.

The sergeant's attention is diverted by the newcomers.

Weegee seizes his chance.

Going below the cop's broad back, Weegee kneels along with the bearers in the brutal street, oil or blood soaking into his pants leg. He lifts his lens and sights through it numbly, letting the camera have its way. It's dark inside the viewing glass — even darker than the street. Then he sees a cop's flashlight roving the crumpled body, snagging on its features, isolating bits of the corpse, giving them an importance they might actually deserve.

The stretcher-bearers move in closer, as if to cradle the man in their own arms, to bear him away in his old tweed coat like ascending angels. One of the bearers lays a hand on the stiff's hip and rolls it onto the stretcher.

A cop shouts, "No, not that way!"

The crowd sucks in a collective gasp of horror.

Weegee shoots.

His flash freezes everything.

The body is tumbling into the stretcher.

But Tobacco Jack's head remains behind, rooted to the sidewalk.

There it is, fixed forever by Weegee's intervention, the ultimate violation.

The cop who warned Weegee off breaks the spell. He drags Weegee to his feet, pushes him away, yelling, "Geddoutta here, you snoopy bastid! I should smash that goddamn camera of yours!"

Weegee needs no further prod: scramming is all he wants to do.

The crowd and the cops now close in around the corpse, shutting out the sight, spinning Weegee blinded into the night.

He leans against his car, gasping, winded, frightened, still seeing Jack's head like the trophy of some saloon Salomé. His feelings of revulsion and pity are tremendous, even greater than when he shot the woman watching her daughter and granddaughter perish in flames. Yet at the same time, with a deep sense of shame and disgust, he wants to study the image more carefully,

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to see the moment he captured on film. He wonders if he should open the trunk and get to work developing the neg. Before he knows it, he's halfway there, the key out of his pocket.

Then Detective Trevino strolls up.

The dick wears a weary face. The brim of his fedora looks mashed, like he's been working it between his hands.

"Weegee. How's tricks?"

"Not bad. Till just now."

Trevino sighs. "I know. This is a nasty one. Ever heard of the Human Head Cakebox Murderer?"

Weegee feels a sickening pang, deep in his gut. Another memory is wrenched out of the cold muck and freezing mire like a week-old drowned man being hauled from the East River — hardly recognizable. He can't let on that the name alone makes him nervous. Something fearful is developing, but it's nothing to do with him.

He forces a grin for the cop's benefit. "Nope."

Trevino smiles wryly. "Finally, a case we managed to keep secret from Weegee the All-knowing. I'm pleased as punch, as you can tell from my joyful mug. Well, you just saw some of his handiwork. Appears he was interrupted before he had a chance to stuff the head into a cakebox like he usually does. But his signature's all over the job. Not only that, but the description given by the witnesses who spooked him tallies with what we already knew. The nutcase who does this wears some kinda weird getup, a regular ten-cent comic-book villain."

Trevino pauses. Weegee suddenly notices Tara sitting on the hood of the Chevy, legs splayed immodestly, her cat beside her. Absent mindedly, Trevino reaches back and strokes the kitten. Weegee almost chokes on the dead butt of his stogie.

Trevino stops petting the cat and sighs. "We can't let you use that shot, Weegee. At least not right away. Number one, we don't want to encourage any copycat killers. Number two, we don't want any false confessions, so the fewer details out there the better. Number three — "

"That's enough numbers, Tony, I get the picture."

"That's what I'd expect from the famous Weegee."

"Ha. You know *Life's* paying thirty-five bucks for a good murder, don't you?"

"You want it outta my pocket?"

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"Just thought I'd mention it."

"Yeah, well, you'll get it eventually, just not right now. Be patient. Listen, I gotta move. Jesus, I don't know how the fuck I'm gonna get to sleep when my shift's over — "

"At least your shift's got an end."

Trevino looks at him nervously, as if Weegee has just brought up something forbidden. "Of course it does. Of course...." But there's a question in his voice.

As soon as Trevino turns away, Weegee tosses the Speed Graphic down on the seat and climbs in. Tara's already there. He jabs the starter button, twisting the key, and the car rumbles to life.

Moving again, he feels oddly at ease, as if he's on a barge drifting effortlessly with the current. Forget about ghosts, or strange powers pushing him. No need to reach for wild explanations. The fact is, Weegee knows this night city better than the inside of his eyelids. Prop the camera on the dashboard and let it scout the streets, let it do the driving. If he were to go blind, he would never be lost; he could probably keep driving with both eyes poked out.

Or with his head missing.

SEVEN
THE BOWERY

At No. 267 Bowery, sandwiched between missions and quarter-a-night flophouses, is Sammy's, the poor man's Stork Club. There is no cover charge nor cigarette girl. Neither is there a hatcheck girl: patrons prefer to dance with their hats and coats on. But there is a lively floor show... the only saloon on the Bowery with a cabaret license.

After midnight, some odd types always drop in for a quick one. There's a woman called "Pruneface," a man called "Horseface".... Ethel, the Queen of the Bowery, generally sports a pair of black eyes Nature did not give her. A gent with a long white beard continually claims he is looking all over for the man who stole his wife forty years ago. Old-timers wonder whether, when thief and victim meet, the wife-stealer will get beat up or thanked.

Tonight, as on many nights, Weegee is one of the early morning drop-ins.

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On the stage, in front of the gallery of framed photos, some of them Weegee's, a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound woman named Norma, in yards of satin and pounds of makeup, belts out "Don't Sit under the Apple Tree." A tuxedoed man is drunkenly nuzzling a live pig lying on a tabletop. Two female imposters have picked up an unwitting sailor.

There's a burly dwarf standing at Weegee's left, dressed in nothing but a paper hat and grubby diaper while quaffing his foamy draft brew. There were numbers on the hat once, nineteen-forty something, but now only the peeling "1" remains. The costume is a leftover from a New Year's Eve party, but here it's always the stroke of midnight, always the edge of the same old New Year, and even that turns stale and flat, like the blackened confetti trodden thick as sawdust underfoot.

Although the floor is a throng of bodies packed cheek to jowl, and although all the seats at the gingham-covered tables are taken, no one moves to occupy the spot at Weegee's right where Tara stands, her chin barely clearing the bar. No one acknowledges the presence of the half-bare waif either.

Sammy brings Weegee his customary boilermaker.

Reaching for the beer stein, Weegee finds his hand quivering.

Over the hubbub, Sammy says, "Take a photo with those jitters, and it'll look like ya shootin' an earthquake."

"Tell me something new."

Sammy's face grows concerned. "Ya okay, Weegee?"

"Yeah. I just need some rest."

"Well, what's stoppin' ya?"

"My camera."

"Ha! That's a good one!"

Weegee downs his shot. Then he rests his head on the bar.

Behind his back, the raucous life of the saloon continues. Sounds convey the scenes he knows so well. Two old broads, Mabel and Flo, are hoofing it on stage, decked out in dresses that were old when vaudeville was young. Pretzel and hotdog vendors have entered, making their pitch.

Weegee feels half dead. Is the only time he's alive when he's looking through his camera? He's forgotten what he does during the day. Sleep, mostly.... Or does he? Maybe he just goes into some kind of Buck Rogers suspended animation when the camera doesn't need him. He can't be sure....

From his right elbow comes a too-familiar voice.

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"What would make you happy?"

Weegee raises his head. Tara's standing on the brass rail, bobby-soxed feet arched over it. Her cat's drinking slops on the mahogany bartop.

"I just wanna sleep," he says.

"So why don't you?"

"Do *you* do whatever you want? For instance, did you ask to show up on my front seat tonight?"

She shakes her head solemnly. "You did."

"Me?"

She leans forward and touches his hand, speaking more urgently now. "Why can't you sleep, Weegee?"

"Jesus, what do you think? It's the goddamn camera!"

Everyone stares at him for a second; Sammy's should never be so quiet. He sinks into his shoulders, embarrassed, while the sound level creeps back up again.

"I'm sorry I yelled," he mumbles, close to the girl's pretty pink ear. "I don't mean to snap at you. It's just...the camera won't let me stop. Ever since I got it, I feel like I'm its damn slave. It wants shots, you know? Vivid, heart-stopping, bloody tragic shots! If only I could find the ultimate shot, then maybe it would let me be. Maybe then I could rest."

"I know what it wants," she says, with such confidence that he believes her instantly.

"How could you?" he says.

"Because I came out of it. Just like you."

"You came — what are you talking about?"

"What if you could photograph the Cakebox Murderer? Catch him in the act?"

Again, at that name, Weegee feels revulsion like vomit rising up in him. Something horrible is being invoked — a murderer, out there, wandering the city, severing heads. Nothing to do with him — but then why does he take it so personally?

"I know where to find him," she says.

"You're full of shit."

"No I'm not."

Despite himself, Weegee finds himself believing her. After all, she's a spook, isn't she? In touch with the night city. One of them.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks. "Why are you here? What do you

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want from me?"

"I'll tell you when you screw me," she says flatly. Weegee cringes and glances around nervously, but no one looks their way. He might as well be standing at the bar talking to himself.

Weegee hangs his head again. When he lifts it, he prays Tara will be gone.

She isn't. And in her eyes is something that makes her look very old — as old as the eternal city, the endless night. As if this childish form is not her true one, but only a facet of it, something to win his confidence.

"Well...I know a place," he says.

EIGHT
SUB-CELLAR BALL

TWO WALLS of the basement are brick; two are raw, unfinished rock. Gurgling waste pipes run across the walls like cell bars. In one corner crouches the huge bulk of an asbestos-clad furnace, giving off a stink of heating oil like Manhattan's own minor Moloch. The furnishings of the basement consist of some tin pails and bushel baskets, an old steamer trunk and a water-spotted mattress.

Weegee can't bring himself to take Tara to his cheap apartment. Instead, he drags this ghost of his own sick mind to this cellar, where a friendly building superintendent frequently lets jazz musicians hold a jam.

He tries to rationalize what he's doing by reminding himself that she's only a phantom.

But the hot touch of her hand rips this last defense away.

Under her skirt the girl wears white cotton panties hand-embroidered with pink roses around the waist. Weegee worries they'll get dirty when they hit the floor, especially when the kitten curls up on them.

She kneels on the mattress in front of him.

Weegee pauses behind her momentarily, his own wool pants around his knees.

"You're not real," he whispers. "You aren't, are you?"

Tara looks backwards over her shoulder. "No. But you aren't either."

"You got things mixed up, kid. I'm Weegee. I'm famous."

"You're the 'alleged' Weegee. You're only *supposed* to be him." She turns toward him. "Take that off."

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He looks down. He's still got the camera slung over his shoulder, bumping against his bare waist. She moves to touch it, but he stops her hands. "No."

"You have to. Please."

He relaxes slightly, helps her lift the thing, her small hands moving under his own. They set it gently on the floor, and at the last moment she turns it so it faces away from them, the lens looking into a corner, oddly forlorn for an inanimate object. Weegee feels guilty relief. He's tempted to reach out, to stroke it again — but she catches his hand and brings it toward her, placing it on her breast. Her lips tremble and her eyes lock onto his, young again, innocent.

"I — I can't do this," he whispers. "You're young enough to be my daughter."

She moves closer, pressing against him, her lips against his ear. "I am your daughter."

Weegee struggles, but his ankles are caught in his pants, he can't move away. Her arms lock around him, holding with a gentle pressure.

"And your sister. And yourself," she says. "We're the same stuff. I had to get close enough to tell you, without the camera between us."

"Tell me..." he gasps.

"You're safe — this is all we have to do. We're neither of us whole, alleged Weegee."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Because you're not the real Weegee, no more than I'm a real girl, or this is the real New York. We're both photographs, don't you see? We're pictures the real Weegee, whoever he was, took. This is his city."

"You're crazy!" he says.

"Don't be afraid of me. Don't be ashamed. It wasn't you who caught me sleeping — it was Weegee. He caught you, too! None of this is our fault, but we're stuck here until somehow we undo it."

"Photographs! This is insane! I don't know what you are, but I'm alive. I've got things to do, pictures to take, unfinished business — "

"You think it's the camera driving you, Weegee, but really it's you. You're the one with the power. The one full of need. Have you looked at yourself, Weegee? Have you ever really looked at yourself?"

She lets go of him now, and he stumbles back, grabbing for his clothes, his camera. She snatches up a chipped piece of mirror lying in a corner, and

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holds it out to him.

"Look!" she says.

"Get away from me!"

But he's already seen...

A face bent and bubbling like a Coke bottle melted in a bonfire, the left eye huge and endlessly gaping, the other forever squinting as if through a viewfinder; his nose squashed and flattened. It's not a horrible distortion, but it's undeniable. He snatches the mirror from her fingers, hoping it's the fault of the glass. Smashes it down on the bare floor. Staring down into the shards, he sees the same thing. He's a twisted joke, a self-portrait taken in a carnival mirror....

Cool small fingers slide in among his own.

"Now you've met yourself, you're ready to meet him," she says. "He's one of us, too. Part of you and me. Something incomplete we need to finish with."

Weegee — the "alleged" Weegee — can't argue with her. He knows all too well who she's talking about:

That evil, out there in the night. The one with a practical joker's name.

"Where?" he says numbly.

"Not far. Right down here in the Bowery, under our noses. Up on the El."

NINE
THE BEST PEOPLE GO TO HEAVEN

There's no rear view mirror in the coupe, and now he knows why. He must have glimpsed himself once, long ago, and torn it out, starting in on the hard, steady labor of denial.

He speeds along a black and almost empty street, past boarded-up liquor and Optimo cigar stores, decrepit brick tenements, shuffling figures wrapped in rags, a few startled souls picked out in his headlamps as if his is the first light they've ever seen, blinding them like cave creatures.

Suddenly, Tara issues an order.

"Turn here."

He throws the wheel hard to the right and narrowly escapes at full speed into a sharp, spiraling turn that takes him down some impossible concrete chute, his headlights scraping down and down over a dead gray wall that looks

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like raw dirt, with twisted strands of roots or maybe frayed electric cable poking out of it; until after an implausibly long time the spiral straightens out, depositing him on a long dark avenue, and he finally spots something he recognizes.

Skeletal metal rises ahead of him, black columns lining the avenue, joining overhead.

The El.

Odd, there's no moon or stars tonight, only a weird light the likes of which he's never seen. The whole city seems to be melting, shimmering beneath the humid sky that's like the moist ceiling of an underwater cavern pressing down.

In the morning, he knows, the sun will shine through these tracks in beautiful black and gold patterns, giving meaning to the lives of forgotten men. He'll be asleep then, in the morning, but it means something to him to know that others will see it.

If that morning ever comes....

Now he's zooming through the aisle of metal columns; they're like corroded iron trees lining the avenues of an eerie, broken-down industrial estate. The complicated ironwork seems to continue overhead and on either side for an infinite distance.

The police radio has been dead for a while, though Tara is guide enough. But suddenly the classical station, barely a whisper anyway, dies out too. The signal is lost under so much metal, so much earth. Ugly static pours from the speakers till Tara turns it off. He finds her movement reassuring, because it has occurred to him that he might lose her too.

"Just up ahead." Weegee spots a staircase, iron treads rising up to the level where the trains ride the trestles.

He brakes the car alongside the stairs, still in the shadows of the girders.

He quickly loads the Speed Graphic. Then he gets out.

Tara follows silently.

There's no cars, no people. Where are the inevitable spectators he's so used to? Nowhere to be seen. He longs for the vapid parties he occasionally covers, socialites and dancers, smiles and fast friends, quick kisses in the dark, the simultaneous pop of the flash and the cork, as the champagne spills from the stem of the bottle, spills like the light from his bulbs, or the flood of images pouring through his mind as he slows his step and hesitates at the foot of the staircase with its switchbacks.

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The camera draws him upward.

At the first switchback, Weegee looks down. A column blocks his sight of the car. The street seems wreathed in a newly risen mist. Weegee grows dizzy on the stairs. Gravity always claims you in the end. The dead fall down, death doesn't move, it lies down forever while other crimes scurry off into shadows, fugitive, leading to pursuit and threatening shouts, guns fired, all that busy activity of life. That's how he knows he's alive — that whatever this long night is, it isn't death. Maybe Tara's right after all. Maybe this place is just a photograph — or a heap of them, collaged together, linked only by the eye that took them. Wherever that eye may be now, the images live on.

"Go on," chides Tara. "Up."

Yes, up. Don't pause to look back. Up to the open air, the stars, the bustle of trains and life. Leave the car behind, catch a homeward train and be out of here, recover the disguises and the rubber boots another time....

At last, after many turns, he gains the platform.

It's dark, striped with shadows, empty. Except for something pink resting on a bench.

Weegee moves closer.

The focus is always six or ten feet, even for closeups....

The pink object resolves itself into an innocuous cakebox. That's all. An innocent thing, tied up with a string, left behind by a sleepy purchaser. Just a cakebox, whether forgotten or abandoned. Weegee's curious about what it contains. Maybe it's canoli or creampuffs or crunchy *chruscik* —

Anything but a human head.

Approaching the box, Weegee imagines calling the cops to announce his find, without telling them of its innocence.

How they'll laugh, opening the box to share the pastry right here on the tracks in the dark! Now that'll be a picture, a bunch of cops with crumbs and frosting or powdered sugar on their faces and fingers, caught in his flash like guilty kids raiding an icebox.

At the box, Weegee defiantly, resolutely snaps the string and lifts the lid.

It's empty.

The weighted wooden shaft catches him slantwise across the neck and skull and sends him crashing down.

The Speed Graphic — his talisman, his demon, his identity — skitters away, across the platform. He feels all his power going with it.

Despite the immense pain lighting up the inside of his skull like God's

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own flashbulb, Weegee manages to crawl a few feet and turn, but he's never felt so vulnerable, so lost. Without his camera, what can he do? He's nothing without it. Sights come and go in the darkness — he illuminates none of them, understands and communicates nothing.

It is his time to die, isn't it? He's outlived his usefulness.

His right eye is swimming in blood, the left one bulging as if ready to pop from the socket. He looks up to see how it will end.

Evil stands at the edge of a shadow, half in darkness, half in light. There's something of each of them in the figure — and something that just looks *wrong.*

The Cakebox Murderer wears a fantastic suit contrived of mismatched odds and ends. On his head is an air-raid-warden's metal helmet fastened under the chin. His face is swathed in thin muslin. His eyes are covered with welder's goggles. His torso is bulked out with layers of cloth, canvas, and rubber. Several pairs of pants balloon around his legs. Strapped to his shoes are blocks of wood wrapped in cloth to make him look taller and to soften his steps. But none of this is the strangest part.

In one rubber-gloved hand he holds his nail-studded bludgeon.

In the other, a crusted hacksaw.

But those are easy enough to believe in.

It's something else that mystifies Weegee.

He struggles to rise, but slumps back, dizzied and weak.

The Cakebox Murderer slowly advances. As he separates fully from the shadows, Weegee figures out what it is that looks so damn strange about him.

Everything about him is reversed. Where his hacksaw should reflect highlights of the platform lamps, it throws off black sparks. Where the folds of his absurd costume should gather in shadow, instead they envelop faint dustings of light. He drinks in the light and turns it to darkness, and casts back darkness like another kind of light. This is a creature that vanishes in daylight — a monster that glows in the dark.

The sort of thing that would haunt a photograph.

Weegee murmurs helplessly, "Tara...." He looks painfully around for her form —

There she is.

The Speed Graphic is in her hands.

Somehow he can tell that the stupid kid has the focus set on infinity.

Tara's expression is invisible beneath the camera poised expertly in front

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of her face. But Weegee knows she's smiling for the first time that night.

"Say cheese!"

The Cakebox Murderer spins and hurls himself at her, a blur of reversed edges, moving faster than she's prepared for. Weegee cries out, but too late. The bar crashes down, crunching into the camera, shattering the bulb and the metal reflector, totaling the case, turning the lens to crushed ice, wrecking the film inside. The twisted metal drops from Tara's bleeding hands. She stares down at it, her face blank with terror, absorbed in the loss. He remembers her saying, *I came out of it.* And now that god is dead....

But the Human Head Cakebox Murderer lives. He raises his bar again, covering her in his luminous shadow. She stares up in paralyzed submission —

And Weegee screams. Not with his mouth, but with his eyes.

Searing white light pours over the monster. Shadows leap into sudden intensity, seeming to set the platform on fire. The murderer's hue shifts from light to dark, dark to light, searing in places. The creature turns, throwing up its arm to ward off the flash that comes pouring out of Weegee's eyes. But the light ignites the smoked-glass lenses; they focus the rays inward, cooking out the sick brain, cauterizing whatever vile impulses drive him —

The monster howls, its shadow now a stain of almost total blackness, down in the depths of which Weegee barely sees Tara cowering — but safe.

The light fades slowly from Weegee's eyes, and he thinks, *She was right. It was me all along, and not the camera.*

The camera is a small pile of slag, but he doesn't need it now. It can't rule him. And the creature cannot frighten him or anyone now. It totters blindly about, groping at air, its costume in rags, seared to ashes, blistering, blackened.

Weegee finds the strength to stand. He pushes past the creature, intending only to grab Tara and run, but Weegee misjudges his force and the murderer trips on his clumsy clogs, falling sideways, flailing. The madman catches the railing with his gut and goes over.

The sound the body makes hitting the street is a familiar one. Still, Weegee leans over the railing to make sure of it.

It's dark in the depths beneath the track, and he's somewhat blinded himself. Hard to tell exactly what he's seeing. But somehow it's not nearly as dark as it's been. A subtle light is growing all around him, buzzing between the girders, as if the light from his eyes had leaked into the sky and set off a chain reaction.

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He backs up laughing. "Dawn!" he shouts. The trestles and tracks and ironwork angles are threatening to turn to gold. He turns to find Tara, to share it with her. Dawn is coming to the city!

But he's alone on the platform. Nothing remains of the struggle but a small sprinkling of shattered glass. He kneels and touches a finger to it, sees the stuff glisten with the imminent light; on an impulse, he puts it to his tongue, and grins. Not glass —

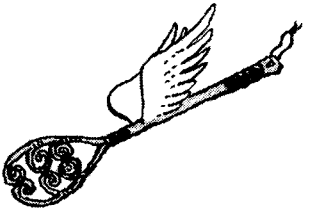
Sugar.

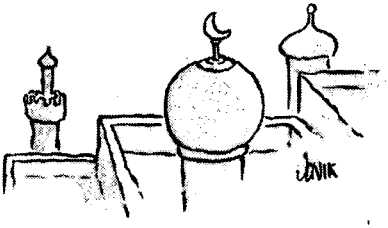
It tastes the way he feels. It tastes like the pictures he'll take from now on.

Right then and there, he resolves to cut the wires of the police radio set in his car. He's through with chasing ambulances, through with being haunted. He's been saturated with the tears of women and the sight of impoverished children sleeping on fire escapes. From now on, he'll do all his shooting by daylight. He'll sleep only at night.

He looks up through the girders at the pinkening sky, and wonders.

What if night never comes?





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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Beginnings, Middles and Ends, by Nancy Kress, Writer's Digest Books, 1993, $13.95.

The Writer's Guide to Creating a Science Fiction Universe, by George Ochoa and Jeffrey Osier, Writer's Digest Books, 1993, $18.95.

Blackburn, by Bradley Denton, St. Martin's, 1993, $19.95.

Was, by Geoff Ryman, Knopf, 1992, $22.00.

WEARING ONE of my other hats, I am a teacher of fiction writing. I don't think I can teach anyone to be an artist, but I do think there are things to be learned about craft. Writing well involves both unconscious and analytical processes, but teaching students about form without giving them formulas can be difficult. So I'm always on the lookout for sensible books to suggest to aspiring writers who have never thought about writing analytically.

Nancy Kress, familiar to *F&SF* readers from the strong work she has published here over the years, including her Nebula Award winning "Out of All Them Bright Stars," has produced *Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, which although it does not deal with all that goes into the making of stories, does take you step by step through processes that can make ideas into stories, or turn unsuccessful stories into successful ones. And though it's not specifically aimed at the writing of SF, it's full of solid practical advice on how to produce publishable fiction, including many tricks of the trade, exercises and examples. It won't tell you how to create a work of art, but it has much to say about the craft of

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fiction writing.

One of the disappointments of teaching aspiring SF writers is how many of them seem to base their entire conception of what science fiction is on TV and movies. Not that there aren't good examples of both, but invariably students who don't *read* end up producing sadly inadequate writing. And many are not familiar enough either with science or with commonplace SF concepts that have been around for years. You need to know enough science to be able to tell when you are violating scientific law, and enough SF to be able to tell when the wonderful new idea you've invented is a cliché. *The Writer's Guide to Creating a Science Fiction Universe*, by George Ochoa and Jeffrey Osier, is a sourcebook of basic scientific knowledge and a description of SF conventions that have developed over the years, from faster-than-light travel to nanotechnology to alternate histories.

Neither of these books is a substitute for wide reading of SF and non-SF; they are neither necessary nor sufficient to produce good fiction, but anyone trying to write good science fiction should find them useful.

Now for two novels whose fantastic element is slim, by writers until now firmly associated with SF. Both of them are about the source of evil in the world, people's attempts to cope with it, and childhoods gone sadly awry.

Bradley Denton's *Blackburn* tells the story of Jimmy Blackburn, a good-hearted Kansas boy who grows up to be a mass murderer — without losing that good heart. Jimmy is bruised by the cruelty of the world, of other boys, of his alcoholic father. He has bad luck with dogs. He tries unsuccessfully to protect himself and others from this brutality, then turns moral arbiter with a .357 Colt, a series of false identities, stolen cars, and dead-end jobs. *Blackburn* is a picaresque flight into the dark heart of America in the company of Kansas's answer to Holden Caulfield, with a gun.

The early chapters, telling of Blackburn's childhood in Wantoda, Kansas, are the most moving. Jimmy learns about hypocrisy in school, about brutality at home, about revenge on the playground. For Denton, home is not a refuge but the source of the problem, the training ground for insanity. Corruption is everywhere, from the petty to the profound, and Jimmy does not distinguish between his father's brutality toward his mother and the town cop's brutality toward a dog. Kansas is the buckle on

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the Bible Belt and Wantoda is the dark side of Lake Wobegone, an average American town with an average town's share of irrationality, injustice, and violence.

Powered by clear prose and a simple narrative, *Blackburn* is a heady, disturbing read. At times it reminds me of Russell Banks's novel *Affliction*, another tale of a son of an alcoholic father whose dreams of justice turn to violence. But where Banks reached for tragedy, Denton aims for dark comedy. By the age of seventeen, when he runs afoul of the law and hits the road, Jimmy has developed a lethal hatred for his father and a hopeless desire to escape. The novel alternates chapters of biography with descriptions of various murders, an album of snapshots from his twenty-one victims. Like his comic book hero the Green Lantern, Blackburn recognizes evil-doers in the world; unlike him he doesn't just prevent them from doing wrong — he puts a .357 slug into their heads.

Some of Blackburn's killings are purposeful vengeance, others almost accidents. Still others are darkly hilarious, such as Blackburn's meeting with a couple of crooked auto mechanics in Chicago or with a pulp writer in Memphis. At first these antisocial parables are invigorating, as Blackburn fatally deflates various hypocrites and liars. Blackburn becomes a hero avenger, the enforcer of justice in an unjust world.

But after a while the laughs began to catch in my throat. On page 277 Blackburn confesses to the savior Morton, an escapee from an asylum who thinks he's the Second Coming, that he's killed nineteen men. "Did they deserve it?" Morton asks. "Every one of them," Blackburn replies. "Piss on 'em, then," Morton says, and absolves him.

Do all these men deserve to die? — well, that depends. Crooked auto mechanics, door-to-door encyclopedia salesmen, brutal cops, hack writers, philandering husbands, abortion clinic bombers, rapists, callous army recruiters — they're all sinners. Add these little sins together, and we get the degraded world we live in. None of us like it. Readers will take satisfaction in seeing so many bastards dispatched so gleefully, but the farther we go along the more problematical Jimmy Blackburn's career gets. We're bound to run up against a killing that doesn't seem so funny. We're bound to find a victim who isn't any more morally hopeless than ourselves. To the degree we take delight in Blackburn's career we are implicated in his crimes.

Normally we rely on the state to do the judging and execute the of-

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fenders it deems unredeemable. Most of us accept the result and don't question the judgments, except to feel that maybe the state isn't getting all the bad guys. So a lot of people nowadays are looking for a Jimmy Blackburn, a moral man without doubt, to clean up Dodge.

But late in the novel Blackburn tells us, "*Green Lantern* isn't what it used to be." I write this the day after the FBI attempted to force the Branch Davidians in Waco to give up, resulting in the death of eighty-six people in the compound. A lot of us, in government and out, think we are in possession of right and own guns to back us up. We ache for that hero, pure of heart, and for unequivocal happy endings. Blackburn attempts to be Green Lantern, but the result is not a happy ending.

I think Denton is asking us to consider that. He offers no answers. By giving Holden Caulfield a gun and the will to use it, he shows us the shadow side of the American belief in a utopia of individual freedom, where action powered by purity of heart can save the world.

Like Jonathan, one of the major characters of Geoff Ryman's *Was*, my first encounter with *The Wizard of Oz* was through the yearly TV broadcasts that began in the 1950s and imprinted MGM's version of Oz on my generation. I was scared to death by Margaret Hamilton, enchanted by the scarecrow and the Emerald City, eager to visit Oz, where Dorothy is threatened but prospers, where Toto is threatened but survives, where evil is easily separated from good, where home is sweet and family is a refuge from the harsh world. That, my friends, is why they call it fantasy.

Was is the story of Jonathan, who as a withdrawn, almost autistic boy in Canada in the 1950s made the Oz characters his imaginary friends. Jonathan grows up to be an actor in low-budget horror movies. He also is gay, and on page one of the novel he is already dying of AIDS.

It's also the story of the "real" Dorothy Gael, an orphaned girl growing up with her Aunty Em and Uncle Henry in the frontier town of Manhattan, Kansas in the 1870s. In this real world, Aunty Em is Emma Gulch, a cross between the loving Aunty Em of the Oz story and Toto's nemesis, the malicious spinster Elvira Gulch. In her, Ryman combines both the protective embrace of mother and the destructive embrace of the wicked witch. Aunty Em really loves Dorothy, but she also resents her. With a little help from Uncle Henry and the town of Manhattan she destroys

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Dorothy, without intending to, by the very means she thinks are necessary to raise her up right.

It's also the story of Frances Gumm, later Judy Garland, and her troubled family. We get a glimpse of the making of the 1939 movie, and of Garland's ability, because of her troubles, to dredge up authentic emotion on the make-believe of a movie sound stage, and her inability to control her life off of it.

We also meet Bill Davison, who as a teenager meets an old woman named Dotty in a mental institution in Waposage, Kansas in 1956, and brings her some understanding. He later becomes a psychiatrist who treats Jonathan and in 1989 accompanies him on a search for the fate of the real Dorothy Gael in Manhattan.

Finally, this is the story of L. Frank Baum, who briefly teaches school in Manhattan in 1882.

In *Was* Geoff Ryman pulls off a kind of miracle, forging these complex materials into a unified, compelling novel. Jumping back and forth over more than a century, Ryman runs the risk of incoherence but brilliantly avoids it by our involvement in these characters, our concern for the fate of Dorothy, and the thematic parallels that run between these people, times, and places. He runs the risk of turning us off with his relentlessly dark material, but somehow manages to find light in that darkness. He runs the great risk of sentimentality, but through his dispassionate attention to giving us facts, without interpretation, he avoids it.

By halfway through this book I was as caught up as I would be by a superior mystery. *Was* is a mystery. The mystery is, first, what will happen to Dorothy and Jonathan. Will they escape from what seems to be inescapable misery? Second, how the hell is Ryman going to pull this together into a conclusion?

This is a story about learning to live both within and beyond one's past, the Land of Was. The Land of Was can be both horrible or consoling, the source of our present difficulties or a refuge from them. It's about finding condolence against the horrors of life. It's about the difficulties of growing up. How people are tormented and shaped by their personal histories, how they struggle to overcome them, how some manage to do so. It's more complex than I can say, and more coherent than the disjointed description of its parts that I've given here can convey. *Was* is a kind of magic act, and I'm rather stunned by Ryman's performance. This is all a matter of taste, perhaps, but I am knocked out by the challenges Ryman sets himself and the way he masters

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them.

In *Was,* Ryman pushes farther toward an understanding of the source of evil than Denton. In a harsh world, people resort to physical and emotional abuse. The abuse stretches across generations. It is not so much a matter of evil as human limitation. Auntie Em is not an intentionally wicked woman, but a frustrated one. Her frustration shows in her attitudes toward her dead sister, the townspeople, her husband. It's shown in the only true emotional release she allows herself, her charismatic religion. Other characters find other escapes. For Dorothy, who has no power to change things, it's fantasy. Unknowing, she writes the first abortive Oz story, and L. Frank Baum, who understands her pain but can do nothing about it, takes it from there.

People hurt each other because they cannot control the world or themselves, because they have been badly taught, because they misconceive what is possible and impossible. *Was* convincingly paints a picture that family dysfunction is not rare, but almost universal. Judy Garland's father hurts her mother because he is homosexual in a world that rejects homosexuality. Garland's mother hurts her daughter by forcing her into performing to compensate for the lack of love from her husband. Garland rejects her mother for leaving her father. None of these acts is portrayed as right, or justified. So who is to blame? How to find a way out of this mess? Is there a thread to pull that will unravel evil and lead us to good?

Ryman's thread pullers are Bill Davison and L. Frank Baum. Somehow these men have not been as damaged as others, or have overcome their damage. They listen and sympathize. They refuse to do bad things, as much as they can, and refuse to condone bad things, as much as they can recognize them, but they are not righteous. Their forbearance is not moral quietism. Some things are wrong. But they do not consider all expression of self outside the norm a threat.

In a scene near the end of *Was,* Dorothy is asked the same question that the Dorothy played by Judy Garland is asked at the end of the 1939 film:

"What have you learned, Dorothy?" he asked her.

Dorothy thought a moment and said, "I learned to be disappointed and not to hope too much. I learned how to be beaten and how to beat others. I learned that I am worthless and the world is worthless, and that love is a lie and if it's not a lie, then

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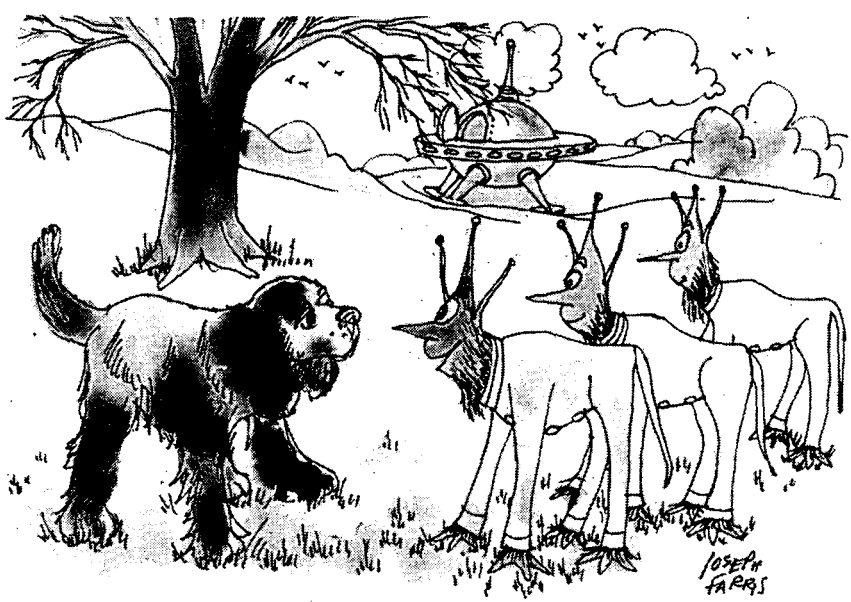
it's wasted."

Too many of us take this lesson from life. Ryman says to redeem the past and insure the future, to break the chain of abuse, we must unlearn it. Although there is little overt fantasy in this novel, *Was* is about fantasy, its importance to us and its dangers. We — not just us SF fans, but all of us — live by fantasies. Ryman concludes his afterword to the novel with an appeal:

Tomorrow, we could all decide to live in a place not much different from Oz. We don't. We continue to make the world an ugly, even murderous place, for reasons we do not understand.

These reasons lie in both fantasy and history. Where we are gripped by history — our own personal history, our country's history. Where we are deluded by fantasy — our own fantasy, our country's fantasy. It is necessary to distinguish between history and fantasy whenever possible.

And then use them against each other.



"We'd like to talk to you about a free-trade treaty."

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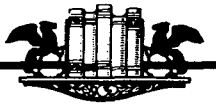

Books To Look For

ORSON SCOTT CARD

Harry Turtledove, *The Guns of the South: A Novel of the Civil War* (Random House/Ballantine, Oct 92, cloth, 513pp, $19)

PART OF the fun of time-travel novels is that you get to rewrite history and play with all the might-have-beens. The trouble with time-travel novels is that after a while it can get pretty arbitrary and dumb, mostly because the novelists usually have such a shallow understanding of history that it's impossible to buy into their scheme of how the past might have changed. Not that I or anyone else can possibly *know* what would have happened; the problem is the matter of plausibility. The more the reader knows about the real history, the more implausible and strained the alternate history soon becomes.

The main exception to this is when it's Harry Turtledove writing the alternate history, because not only is Turtledove a historian, he also is an intelligent and perceptive historian, and when you add to this the fact that he's a damn fine storyteller you end up with a time-travel novel that is well worth the time you spend reading it. For if you know Turtledove's work, you will not be surprised to learn that through all the hundreds of pages of this book, never once does Turtledove do anything even remotely dumb. It's like the difference between riding on a rutted dirt road and riding on a smoothly paved one.

But where are we going on this ride? Turtledove's premise is a nasty one indeed (this is praise, by the way): Die-hard Afrikaaners, watching their racially separate world collapse around them, learn how to travel back in time, and the only way they can think of to save themselves is to make sure there's a powerful nation in the world that has great sympathy for their own attitudes toward native Africans. In short, they go back to the American Civil War and give the Confederacy enough highly effective

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modern weaponry to turn the tide of battle. With the North far from victory in 1864, Lincoln doesn't fare so well in his bid for a second term, and General Lee, helped along by some 20th-century medicine, lives long enough to be president of an enduring Confederacy.

As military fiction, as a historical novel, and as rip-roaring sci-fi, *The Guns of the South* hits it out of the park. My only qualm is that I think Turtledove may have bought into just a tiny bit of mythology about the South. One of the things you hear a lot of, living in the South as I do, is a sort of misty-eyed revisionism about how southerners actually were much nicer to "their" negroes than northerners could possibly understand. This paternalistic myth was, in some cases, true, but I think that ruthless totalitarianism was a much stronger strain in antebellum southern culture than Turtledove seems to recognize. While most whites did not countenance "excessive" cruelty toward slaves, the pro-slavery forces were murderously efficient in stamping out any breath of *white* protest against slavery, as those few writers and speakers who dared to speak in opposition in the South quickly found out. The South before the Civil War gave the illusion of being a republic, but on that one issue, at least, there was not a scrap of freedom of speech or of the press, and the virtual coups d'états that led some border states into the Confederacy bear witness to just how pervasive and effective the contempt for democracy was among pro-slavery forces.

Yet even though I reach different conclusions about the South's relative benignity compared to Afrikaaner society, I cannot deny that Turtledove's novel does reflect one legitimate school of thought about the South. Just as Brazil eventually gave up slavery without a civil war, so might a successful Confederacy. And when I was bothered by the fact that Afrikaaners were shown as being inhumanly monstrous in their hatred of blacks, which is sometimes true but certainly not universal, in Turtledove's novel it would be only most virulently obsessive kaffir-haters among the Afrikaaners who would have gone back in time to mess around with history as these people do.

What can I say? I may disagree with some shadings of interpretation in Turtledove's book, but at no point can I say that he is wrong or even misinformed. What few things bothered me may not bother most of you; and what I enjoyed and admired about the book will almost certainly be a delight to you. And as a lifelong admirer of Robert E. Lee, I must say

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I did get some perverse pleasure out of watching him get a chance to work with *superior* forces for a change. Never mind that in my view a pro-slavery victory in the Civil War would have been a moral catastrophe only slightly less dreadful than a Nazi victory in World War II. Given the premises Turtledove works from, he plays the game of alternate histories better than anybody else, and *The Guns of the South* is Turtledove at his best.

Richard Gilliam, Martin H. Greenberg, and Edward E. Kramer, ed. *Confederacy of the Dead* (Penguin/ROC, Jun93, paper, 496pp, $12)

This is a quick review. In a nutshell: Collection of stories about the American Civil War. Lots of horror and fantasy. Some pretty good research. Some pretty good storytelling. No more than the usual percentage of clunkers in a theme anthology. Check it out.

What makes me want to comment on this book isn't the fiction, though. It's the introductions. There are two of them. The first one is by Michael Bishop, and it's an extraordinary one. Have you ever read an introduction to a book that, in effect, gives at best a lukewarm review to the rest of the contents? And yet Bishop does it with such grace that I doubt anybody will be offended.

As Bishop aptly points out in his introduction, he is *not* a southerner. He simply married southern and now lives in the South, and as any southerner can tell you, it ain't the same thing.

So the second introduction takes on even more importance. It's a fascinating, open, well-written essay by editor Richard Gilliam on growing up southern. Now, anybody who knows anything about Southern fandom knows Richard Gilliam, and anybody who knows Richard Gilliam knows something about the gentility and kindness that represent southernness at its best. But Richard is also a New Southerner, in the sense that he is not overfond of the past and recognizes the flaws in his society as well as the graces. I found, as a westerner (*not* a Yankee, thanks) transplanted into southern soil, that Gilliam's views and voice were refreshing and truthful and I sure wish he'd write more. I guess you don't buy a whole book for the intros. So buy it for the stories. Or else stand there in the store and read them. Whatever.

Nina Kiriki Hoffman *Unmasking* (Axolotl Press #27, Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene OR

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97440, 1992, limited cloth and trade paper, 103pp, prices vary)

I first met Hoffman when she was a standout writer at Clarion in '82. As a person she was funny and wise, the kind of person you want to have as a friend, the kind of friend who is immediately as comfortable as if you had known her all her life. As a storyteller, though, she isn't all that comfortable. She sees too deeply into the human soul for any of her work to be reassuring, except in the sense that it can be reassuring to know that somebody understands us. But does she have to understand us so *well*?

The premise of *Unmasking* is simple, and because the book is so short one might assume that the story is slight. Not so. With astonishing concision, Hoffman has accomplished in a hundred pages what would have taken King or Barker many times that number, and in the end I doubt they or anyone else could have told this story half so well. (It's always nice to find a full novel's worth of character, milieu, story, and ideas that you can read in a couple of hours.)

Lewis Wendell has come up with a new drug that breaks down barriers in the mind, bringing suppressed memories to the forefront. Not having a clue to what his own hidden memories might be, and knowing that he had a happy childhood, he blithely introduces this drug into the drinking water of the city he lives in.

What he doesn't count on is the fact that *most* people in this town are hiding from some pretty dreadful memories from their own childhood. Perhaps what they're hiding are memories of awful things that were done to them; perhaps they are even worse memories of unbearable things that they themselves have done. What quickly becomes clear is that it is the very suppression of those memories that makes civilized life possible. The reason people repressed them was because they could not live with them; and now, forced to confront them and unable to escape, they are forced to deal with what cannot be dealt with, and many of them die.

This novella is a kaleidoscope. We are tossed back and forth from one person to another, but we are never lost: A coherent story quickly emerges. There are some who are untouched by the drug. Most of these are protected because they drink only bottled water; some, though, are unaffected because they have no suppressed memories. They have lived with their true past all along.

There is a part of me that would like to say, Hoffman is obviously

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exaggerating. *Most* of us remember our entire past and have not hidden terrible memories from ourselves. But I wonder if I would be right. I have been astonished in recent years by the number of friends and relatives who have told me, under varying circumstances, that large sections of their childhood are missing from their memories; and those who have opened those closed doors have found terrible things indeed. Perhaps Hoffman's story is an exaggeration, but not by much. At the same time I hope I am not fooling myself when I think that there must be more exceptions to this than Hoffman allows for. Certainly I am aware of no such blanks in my own memory, though of course this proves nothing; still, it would be hard to imagine that there was anything *worse* in my past than the things I clearly remember doing or others' having done to me. I mean, if I was going to repress anything, I have a pretty ugly list of memories that I'd really like to lose.

Exaggeration or not, *Unmasking* is a brilliant story that, painful as it might be, you certainly *will* remember. It has a science fiction premise and a horror feel to it, but ultimately it is a novel of character, and it is well worth the trouble you might go to in order to obtain a copy from the publisher or a book dealer. I hope that we don't have long to wait for a collection of Hoffman's short fiction, so that this tale — and her other fine short stories — can be readily available to a wider audience.

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Jerry Oltion's first appearance in the pages of F&SF, *"The Grass is Always Greener" in our February issue, received a flurry of positive response from readers. Normally, Jerry writes hard science fiction for* Analog. *A recent collaboration with Lee Goodloe was a Nebula finalist.*

He returns to these pages with another humor story. "Blue Light Special" was written for a read-aloud Christmas writing workshop. Clearly inspired by the materialism inherent in the winter festivities, this story is — above all else — a story for all seasons.

Blue Light Special

By Jerry Oltion

JANET HOLLOWAY WAS reaching for a sack of charcoal briquets on the bottom shelf of the patio supplies aisle when the Stuff Mart's automatic seasonal decoration system malfunctioned. With a screech of suddenly activated machinery, a panel slid aside in the back of the display to reveal a dark, ominously rumbling hole in the wall, then all the shelves tilted back and everything on them slid into the hole.

Janet snatched at one of the disappearing sacks of briquets, but a robotic arm reached out and swept it away before she could get a good grip.

"Hey!" she said, her shout echoing dozens of others from throughout the store.

Her one-year-old son, Timmy, had been leaning over the edge of the shopping cart and tugging at a stack of lighter fluid cans. They had just begun to topple when another robot arm flicked out and plucked them from the air, faster than the eye could follow. It hesitated a second when it came to Timmy, then with a little mechanical shrug it snatched him away, too. He

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shrieked in surprise — or maybe excitement at the new supermarket ride — but his cry dopplered quickly away to nothing.

Janet was so used to his screeching that she didn't notice his disappearance. She was too busy watching the shelf in front of her bang down flat again and more robot arms quickly stack new merchandise on it. In a few seconds the entire display bristled with plastic jack-o-lanterns, rubber bats, and injection molded face masks. The rest of the store had been transformed as well: heaps of candy overflowed from bins that only a moment before had held pink plastic flamingos, and synthetic spider webs dangled from every fixture.

"What the heck?" Janet said, bewildered. "It's only July." Then she turned and saw the empty shopping cart.

The store manager was a veritable caricature of patient understanding. "We're doing everything we can to locate him," he said, leaning back in his padded office chair and steepling his fingers as if he were about to pray. "But you see, the store has been entirely automated, so there isn't really any room for anyone to go back there to look for him."

"If you've hurt him, I swear I'll sue you for all you're worth!" Janet said, trying to keep up a brave front. The other shoppers lined up at the manager's door cheered.

"I'm sure he's fine," the manager said. "The decorating system is programmed to handle all our merchandise with the utmost caution. It's just a matter of tracing where it put him."

"Hah," a woman in a pink polyester pantsuit said from the doorway. "I know these systems; I used to work at K-mart. Your kid's probably packed away by now along with the rest of the seasonal stuff. Or sent off for recycling if the program decided he wasn't worth saving until next year. Kiss him goodbye, lady."

"I *would* if I could *find* him," Janet wailed.

"Now, now," the manager said, handing her a Kleenex from a pumpkin-shaped box on his desk. "I'm sure we'll have him back to you in no time."

The computer, however, had no record of him. One of the assistant managers suggested checking the pet department in case it had put him there, but he wasn't with the kittens and puppies. They tried resetting the store to

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its normal July display, but Timmy didn't reappear next to the lighter fluid cans, either. They tried switching back to Halloween, but he still didn't show up. They even tried special-ordering a one-year-old child named Timmy, but the computer merely told them it was out of stock.

Meanwhile, shoppers faced with nothing but Halloween displays did what shoppers have done since stores began: they bought what was set in front of them. Within minutes, other stores took notice, and to keep from losing business to Stuff Mart, they reset *their* displays to Halloween, too.

Realizing that his store was setting trends for the first time in history, the manager of Stuff Mart reset his displays for Thanksgiving. The other stores followed suit as soon as word reached them, but shoppers barely had time to lug their pilgrim hats and imitation corn sheaves to the cash registers before a few overeager managers made the next logical move and pushed their decorations ahead to Christmas.

Janet had been trying to convince the Stuff Mart manager to send maintenance robots into the stockroom to search for Timmy when a red-faced checker stuck her head into his office and said, "Christmas is on at Shopko and Wal-Mart!"

His eyes bulging in panic, the manager reached for the bright red master control handle on the wall behind his desk, saying, "We've got to reset our displays for Christmas, too!"

"Now wait a minute," Janet said. "My son is in there somewhere, and I don't think we should — "

"Madame," the manager said, "the day after Thanksgiving is the biggest shopping day of the year. If we let the other stores get the jump on us, even for an hour, we might as well just close the doors." And he shoved the handle over to "Christmas."

A minute later the store underwent another transformation, but this time on a vastly expanded scale. Garland draped every display; fully decorated trees sprang into place at the end of every aisle; and a full-blown nativity scene rose up out of the floor near the front doors.

A familiar wailing came from the baby Jesus. Janet rushed from the manager's office and skidded to a stop in front of the nativity scene, where Timmy was busy pulling the wool off the synthetic sheep.

The woman from K-mart was just pushing a cart full of wrapping paper and ornaments toward the door. "I wouldn't do that," she said as Janet began

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climbing over the railing to retrieve her baby.

"Why not?" Janet asked.

"The automatic shoplifting prevention system, that's why not. You touch him and you'll both wind up in a holding cell, waiting for your day in court. And we both know how long that'd take." The woman shook her head sadly. "No, lady, you'd definitely be better off waiting for the January clearance sales."

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Lynn S. Hightower's mystery novel, Satan's Lambs, *was just published in hardcover by Walker and Company. Lynn also writes futuristic police procedurals. The second in this series,* Alien Eyes, *featuring Detective Dave Silver, came out in February.*

"Point Man" is neither mystery nor science fiction. It is a haunting fantasy story about love and responsibility.

Point Man

By Lynn S. Hightower

SHE WAITED UNTIL he was asleep. He sighed when she left the bed, but did not wake up. Sidnee began the ritual, standing silently by the bed of her daughter, and then her son, listening to see if they breathed, watching the small, chubby faces, swollen sweetly with sleep.

Her hands trembled as she smoothed their blankets. The body, yes, the body was tired. Seven hundred miles in one day to come to the beach — packing and laundry till midnight the night before — the heat, the kids, the semis on the highway . . . God, oh yes, she was tired.

But the mind. The mind would not be still. The mind was alert, watchful. Afraid. But they were safe, for now, her babies.

Everything was under control.

She crept through the dark to the living room, moving carefully in the unfamiliar rental apartment — the "condo," they called it.

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No, it's ours; we bought it, his parents said. It's yours for the week if you want it. Right on the ocean. Have fun.

There was a light on in the kitchen. She paused in the doorway, seeing the room as he saw it, as they saw it, her husband and her children.

Rattan couch with blue floral cushions. Television in a wood cabinet. Large conch shell on the coffee table, dark blue lampshade over a clay vase. Just for a moment, she could fathom the charm. It was new; the paint was fresh and clean-smelling, the carpet thick underfoot — a clean, sweet apartment. Right on the beach.

But the sweetness drained like breath from her lungs. The coffee table was glass, with sharp corners. Toby was two; he tripped and fell a hundred times a day. Cassie was three and a half, and would go straight for the sharp scissors some idiot, some *non*parent, had left on the bottom shelf of the television cabinet.

Sidnee double-checked the locks on the door. Solid dead bolts — two. Good locks — that made her happy. But why did they need good locks?

She sat on the couch and put her head in her hands. Hopeless, she thought. I am hopeless.

Everything is O.K., she told herself. Everything is under control.

The sound of the ocean caught her.

She yanked the drawstring to part the heavy beige curtains. The sliding glass doors were crusty with salt. She unlocked them and wrestled them open, then stepped out on the balcony.

The wood planks were covered with outdoor carpet, scratchy and warm on her bare feet. She closed the door behind her. Who knows — a child might wake up and follow her out. She stood by the wrought-iron railing.

The ocean. Big, black, bottomless, thrusting itself high on the sand, then sucking backward and away. The tide was in, and the water menaced almost beneath the balcony.

She peered over the railing at the swimming pool below. She could jump and go straight to the bottom. A fence separated the pool from a bank of sand. The ocean was less than twenty feet away.

The water was loud. It glistened in the dark.

When they had arrived, after dark and weary to the bone, it had been too late, thank God, to swim. But Ben had softened at the children's excitement and joy, and had taken them to the edge of the water.

Hold their hands, she had shouted, her voice too sharp. And he had

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dutifully taken their little hands, and not let them run up and down the beach, because it was dark, and he knew she would worry.

The waves had lapped at her children's tender, bare feet. The kids had giggled and squished their toes in the wet sand, taking their joyous, tame pleasure in the shadow of her fear and disapproval.

Tomorrow she would have to face the water.

And she wanted them to swim and be free. She wanted them to jump in the waves, and turn brown in the sun, and be *normal* like everyone else.

Beneath the balcony the black water foamed against the sand, ageless, patient.

The whistles woke her — loud, piercing, up and down the beach, the lifeguards sounding the alarm. Sidnee sat up. She'd fallen asleep on the couch, and sunlight poured through the sliding glass doors. She wrestled them open and went out.

They were bringing someone out of the water, on the sand beneath her balcony. An ambulance pulled up, and a small crowd of joggers and beachcombers huddled quietly in a horseshoe of concern.

Two lifeguards, a girl and a boy in red swimsuits, were carrying a body —limp, white, bloodless. Sidnee bit her lip. It was a child, a boy, no more than ten or eleven. His swim trunks were black with water. And he was dead, long dead, drowned out deep in the waves. Where was his mother? she thought. Where was his mother?

The ambulance crew worked on the boy, but Sidnee knew it was no use; she knew a dead body when she saw one. The crowd stirred, and people began looking up the beach.

A woman came toward the ambulance. She was flanked by two young men, beach-patrol patches on their shirts. The woman was not dressed for the beach. She was fat and comfortable-looking, and her denim skirt swayed with the roll of her hips. She walked slowly, dragging her feet.

Jesus God. Poor mama, poor mama, poor mama.

The woman pulled away from the two men with a movement so sudden and violent they were caught off-guard. She ran through the sand. The wind caught her skirt and lifted it disrespectfully up her thighs. Sidnee clutched the railing.

"Honey?"

Ben's voice. Sidnee heard soft shrieks and chatter, and Toby came running

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into the living room. His wet diaper sagged, and he clutched a red bathing suit in his fist.

"Fim!" He said. "Fim, Mommy!"

Ben came smiling behind him, belting his plaid bathrobe. "What's up, Sidnee? What were those whistles?"

Toby slipped through the glass doors, and Sidnee snatched him up. She handed her son to her husband.

"Keep them *in*," she said.

"But —"

"*Please.*" She shut the door in Ben's face, and hurried back to the edge of the balcony.

A man ran down the beach toward the ambulance. He ran well, legs pumping, feet pounding steadily on the hard-packed wet sand. His hair was dark blond and combed back, and his back was slim and well muscled. He wore black swim trunks, and Sidnee saw the metallic glint of an ankle bracelet on his left foot. He passed the mother like she was standing still.

What was he doing, this man who ran like a god down the beach?

The whistles woke her — loud, piercing, up and down the beach, the lifeguards sounding the alarm. Sidnee sat up. She'd fallen asleep on the couch, and sunlight poured through the sliding glass doors. She wrestled them open and went out.

They were bringing someone out of the water, on the sand beneath her balcony. An ambulance pulled up, and a small crowd of joggers and beachcombers huddled quietly in a horseshoe of concern.

Two lifeguards, a girl and a boy in red swimsuits, waited ankle-deep in the water, hands extended to help a man in black swim trunks. He carried a child, a boy, maybe ten or eleven. The boy stirred in the man's arms, and the man laid him gently on the beach. Sidnee could see the glint of an ankle bracelet on the man's left foot.

The boy moved, struggling to sit up. A paramedic supported his shoulders, but would not let him stand.

Sidnee looked for the man who had brought the boy out of the water. Where was he? She squinted. Was that him, moving down the beach?

"Honey?"

Ben's voice. She heard soft shrieks and chatter, and Toby came running into the living room. His wet diaper sagged, and he clutched a red bathing suit

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in his fist.

"Fim!" he said. "Fim, Mommy!"

SIDNEE WATCHED Toby pat a mound of sand with a plastic spoon. His diaper had swelled with seawater, and he looked like a bottom-heavy duck. He found a broken seashell and positioned it carefully on the top of his castle.

The sand was gritty on her sticky, sweaty thighs, and Sidnee brushed it off.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Ben checked his watch. "Two-thirty."

"Don't you think the kids have had enough sun?"

He shrugged. "They're coated with sunscreen. We've been out only forty-five minutes. Let's give them a little longer."

"They need a nap. Both of them."

"Sidnee, we *just* got here. They spent the morning at the grocery store so we'd have something to eat. They spent all day yesterday in the car. Let them play."

She nodded. He was right.

He yawned. "Nap attack."

"Go ahead," she said. "I'll take point."

He smiled at their little joke, that watching the kids was like being point man in a war zone. Anything could happen, and you had to stay alert.

"You sure?" he said.

She nodded. She'd be watching them anyway. Somebody ought to relax.

She realized suddenly that Cassie was gone. She stood up and scanned the beach. There she was. Sidnee smiled at her daughter, who ran headlong into a knot of sea gulls. The birds screamed and scattered, taking to the air. Cassie stopped running and stared up at the sky, watching them fly away.

Sidnee heard the low purr of an engine, and saw a beachpatrol Jeep. The driver couldn't be more than eighteen and was going much too fast for a crowded beach. She ran across in front of the Jeep and snatched Cassie up. Sidnee glared at the tire tracks in the sand. It was ridiculously unfair, to have to watch for traffic on a beach.

But the responsibility was hers. The boy driving the Jeep was exactly that, a boy. You didn't rely on other people to look after your children. You did it yourself, or faced the consequences. Worse than that, actually. Your children faced the consequences.

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Cassie squirmed out of Sidnee's arms and ran to the edge of the water. She stopped, guilt-stricken.

"Can go in, please?" she asked.

Sidnee was aware of the beachful of children who darted in and out of the water without a second thought, children who did not have mothers who said no all the time, children who had not been taught to be wary.

The tide was coming in, and the waves had turned rough.

"Hold my hand?" she said.

Cassie took her hand.

Sidnee was happiest in the shallows — she could almost relax — but Cassie tugged and pulled and plowed into the waves that knocked her sideways.

"Jump," Sidnee said when the waves crested. Cassie jumped, catching Sidnee under the chin with the top of her head. Sidnee bit her tongue and tasted blood. For a moment, she was angry enough to clear the beach and send everyone home.

"Mommy?"

"No, it's O.K., honey." Sidnee moved to her daughter's side. "Get ready. Set. *Jump.*"

Cassie's seal-slick head bobbed above the surface of the water as she caught the wave and rode it. She laughed, scrubbed water drops out of her eyes with her knuckles, and turned to face the next.

Sidnee glanced back at Toby, still playing in the sand, by Ben. Ben was lying on his stomach. Asleep. Two men were stretched on towels a few feet away, their women sunning lizard-brown bodies. Sidnee felt her shoulders tense, aware that the men were staring at her backside as she bent over to help Cassie ride the waves. If she moved down the beach, out of their line of sight, she wouldn't be able to keep an eye on Toby.

One of the men gave her an oily, knowing smile. She turned her back. Enjoy the view, she thought. And may God grant you impotence and a third-degree sunburn.

"No hands!" Cassie pulled free of Sidnee's grip and darted just out of reach.

Sidnee smiled and moved a bit closer. The water was just to her knees, armpit level on Cassie. Everything was under control.

The next wave came in a big swell, and Cassie went under. Sidnee grabbed for her daughter, but she wasn't there. Sidnee looked for the little head to pop up, then caught a glimpse of a small foot. She grabbed the ankle and pulled her daughter up out of the water, upside down and sputtering.

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Sidnee held Cassie close, expecting tears, then saw her daughter was grinning.

"Do again!" she said.

"She O.K.?"

Sidnee looked over her shoulder at Ben. He had the big inflatable boat they'd lugged from home, and Toby toddling along behind him.

"Do again, Daddy!" Cassie said.

Ben laughed and smoothed the hair from her eyes. "How about a ride in the boat?" He looked at Sidnee, who smiled.

A boat ride would be a good way to end the outing. They could go back to the condo, put the kids to bed, and she could curl up with a book. An oasis of safety, a respite from the watch. She helped Ben load the kids in the boat.

"Hold on tight," Sidnee told them.

They nodded, and grasped the handles obediently, their eyes large and bright. Ben towed them deeper into the water, stopping for each wave. He held one side while Sidnee took the other, letting the boat crest and roll with the waves.

"Not too far out," Sidnee said.

Ben smiled, but kept on going. He was a good swimmer, but she was not.

"I mean it, far enough." The water was up to her shoulders. She tugged the boat backward toward shore.

Ben looked at her sadly. "Are you having any fun at all, Sidnee?"

She swallowed and tried to look happy. "Of course I'm having fun. We're on vacation, aren't we?"

"*We* are. I'm not so sure about you."

But he didn't fight to go out any farther, and Sidnee began to relax.

The waves swelled. She clung to the side of the boat and smiled at Ben. Their children were safe between them.

She wished she could just stand and stare at the waves. They were mesmerizing. There was a fishing boat, way out to sea; she would have liked to watch it. Later, maybe, she would come out alone.

She did not see the wave that swamped them.

One minute, she was chest-level in the water; the next, she was submerged, the boat torn out of her hands with outrageous ease. Sidnee surfaced and gulped for air. Another wave crashed over her head, and she went under.

She surfaced again. No boat, no kids, no husband. Something red in the water. Another wave swelled, but she jumped and rode it out, keeping an eye

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on the red thing that she hoped was Toby's swim trunks. She was not a good swimmer, but she kept her head and went sideways through the foaming water.

The current cooperated and brought him to her. She gathered him up in her arms.

He kicked and wiggled and gasped for air, face white and drawn with terror. They'd drifted down the beach with the current; the water was rough. She fought to keep Toby's head in the air.

Something big brushed her leg, and she screamed. Toby burst into tears, and Ben rose up in the water next to her.

"Cassie?" he shouted.

She shook her head.

"Go in," he said. "I'll find her."

She knew it made sense — he was the better swimmer, and a second argument meant another wave over Cassie's head. Sidnee floated toward shore with Toby, staggered up through the waves when she got her footing, and ran, finally, through the hot sand, looking for help. She realized, when she tried to call to the lifeguard, that she'd been holding her breath, because if she could do it, couldn't Cassie?

Sidnee sat cross-legged in the sand and held Toby too tightly. His tiny teeth roughed her skin while he sucked on her shoulder. The sunset was magnificent, dark pink and yellow. It was getting cooler; people were pulling T-shirts over their swimsuits. Someone had put a wool blanket around Sidnee's shoulders, and Toby was warm, a little heater in her lap, but she was cold from the inside out.

She kept thinking about the whistles — the lifeguard standing at attention, and the swell of whistles in the distance as the other guards picked up the alarm and sounded the call for help. And the lifeguards who were still in the water, the ambulance that sat in the sand and waited, and where the hell could they be?

For all her care, for all her concern, she had been distracted by that fishing boat, wanting to be alone so she could stare romantically out to sea. She had not even seen the wave — she who had the ocean under control, she who knew with a mother's antagonistic smugness that nothing could rip that boat from her hands, not with her babies inside.

At first, she'd had to force a silly smile off her face. Oh yes, everyone took

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her seriously, but she was causing a lot of trouble; it was going to be embarrassing as hell when Ben brought Cassie up out of the water. But you took every precaution; you don't risk your husband and child; better to have too much help than not enough. Ben would not need help, though: he was a terrific, strong swimmer; he'd had lifesaving when he was a boy.

But Ben and Cassie hadn't come back.

From second to second, she expected to see Ben rise up from the water. But no, she thought, after all this time? The current was strong; they had drifted down the beach. When he came, he'd be coming from the right, walking through the sand with Cassie in his arms, exhausted and knowing how worried she was. It was a long walk back, and that's what was taking so long. Of course they weren't under the water.

She turned her head to the right, watching for them. She even had a joke ready. "Why didn't you call me?" she would demand in an angry voice. And Ben would stare till he realized she was kidding, then he would laugh and admire her cool. Oh yes, she was ready; this had gone on long enough; she was not having fun; she did not like the beach; come back, please; come back, Ben and Cassie.

There was a murmur from the people who crowded by the ambulance to stare. Some damn woman was crying.

"They've got the boat," someone said.

Who were these people? Why were *they* crying? She wasn't crying, and she wasn't going to look. Whatever was going on over there did not affect her, because anytime now, oh please God, anytime now, Ben was going to come walking up the beach with Cassie.

". . . little girl."

"Just a baby."

". . . snagged on the handle of the boat."

"Shhh. No, she's sitting right there."

Sidnee felt something huge well up inside her. Something too big and too dark, and she held Toby too hard, but he did not cry, and then . . . and then she saw someone, a man? It was not Ben; it was that other man, the one she'd seen run down the beach. No, not run down the beach. Why did she have that image of him running? But she knew the man. He'd brought that ten-year-old boy out of the water just this morning, a lifetime ago.

He was looking at her, walking right toward her, and if she could just concentrate on him, she could keep that big, dark thing away. There was

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something about his face — something knowing, something loving, something like telling your mother your troubles, and having them melt away.

His eyes were yellow, how odd, and his hair was thick and dirty blond. He wore black swim trunks, and the sun glinted on his ankle bracelet. He was trim and well muscled, the hair on his chest was thick, and his skin was deep burnished brown. He walked with strength and assurance, but there was no youthful arrogance in that walk — it was heavy somehow — and the closer he got, the more Sidnee realized that he was older, older than she'd thought.

He stood over her. Tall. She tilted her head back and shaded her eyes. He sat down in the sand beside her.

"Sidnee. We don't have a lot of time, so just listen."

Of course he knew her name. She wasn't really all that surprised. His face was creased with exposure to the sun, wrinkles so deep they were scars.

"Your husband and your daughter have drowned."

"Ben's a terrific swimmer."

She'd interrupted. That was bad. She should try not to make things any more difficult than they were.

"He wouldn't come in without the little girl," the man said. "He kept looking. But the boat turned upside down, you see, and she was caught on the handle. He did look for the boat. He'd found it and was going after it, when he drowned. He kept going a long time. He wouldn't come back without her."

"He was too good a daddy for that."

"Yes. He was a very good daddy." The man cocked his head sideways, and Sidnee kept her eyes on his face because it was the only safe place to look.

"Sidnee, I can bring him back to you. Cassie and Ben, I can bring them both back."

She did not know why she believed him. Was he waiting for her to say yes?

"That's what I do." He turned his face away, and stared at the sand. "I bring people back. But —" He looked up at the sky and squinted.

"But *what*?"

"You have to make a promise. You have to do something for me. Something very . . . hard."

"Are you the Devil?"

He flinched.

"I don't care," Sidnee said. "I'll do anything."

He looked angry. "Usually I just do it. Nobody knows."

"Whatever you want," she told him. "My life for theirs, just tell me. You

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said there's no time. Whatever it is, O.K., just bring them back before it's too late."

"People don't remember me," he told her. "They never know they've been spared."

Sidnee looked into his eyes. She knew that look, saw it in her own eyes sometimes, in the mirror.

"You've been on point too long," she said.

"I need somebody to take over. To take my place. Somebody like you. You and I are a lot alike."

She nodded. O.K. O.K.

"You need to understand. Today I'll help you. We'll go back and start over, and I'll be there to make it go right. But tomorrow, let's say at sunup. Then you have to take my place."

"Whatever it is, I can do it."

"You won't ever see them again. Your husband, your little boy and girl. You won't have a life like you do now. You'll just be where you're needed. And that's all you'll have. For as long as you can stand it, or until you find somebody like yourself, like me, somebody *responsible* —" He looked at her, and she knew what he meant.

"Yes," she said.

THE WAVE swelled. She clung to the side of the boat and smiled at Ben. Their children were safe between them.

She wished she could just stand and stare at the waves. They were mesmerizing. There was a fishing boat, way out to sea; she would like to have watched it. Later, maybe, she would come out alone.

She did not see the wave that swamped them.

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He kicked and wiggled and gasped for air, face white and drawn with terror. They'd drifted down the beach with the current; the water was rough. She fought to keep Toby's head in the air.

Something big brushed her leg, and she screamed. Toby burst into tears, and Ben rose up in the water next to her.

"Cassie?" he shouted.

She shook her head.

"I've got her!"

A man swam toward them, rising and swelling with the waves. He held Cassie up on his chest, keeping her head high above the water. Cassie's eyes were huge, and she was shivering. Ben reached out and took her.

"Thank God," he said. "Where did you come from?"

The man smiled, his blond hair dark with water. Sidnee held Toby and struggled to keep him up, and tears ran down her cheeks. She reached out and touched Ben and Cassie, then turned to look at the point man. But he was gone.

"Where the hell is the boat?" Ben said.

"Screw the boat," said Sidnee. "I want out of the water right now."

It was bad. Watching them. Ben cooking dinner, making pork chops and rice.

"You're on vacation, too," he'd told her. "Go read your book."

But she could not read her book. She laid her palm against Ben's back while he washed lettuce in the sink.

"What you doing?" he said.

"Feeling you."

"Lower, baby." He glanced over his shoulder, smiling. His smile faded. "You are so upset. Is it the kids going under today that's got you shook?"

She nodded.

He put his arms around her. "Sidnee, honey, this is life. Things happen, and you can only do so much."

The same old stupid conversation.

"They're O.K., Sidnee." He let go of her and started chopping lettuce on a cutting board. "You got Toby, and I got Cassie. See, we're a good team."

"If that man —"

"God, this knife is dull." He looked at her. "What man?"

Sidnee went into the living room.

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The children had swiped the pillows off the couch and had curled up on the floor to watch cartoons. Toby sucked his thumb, looking sleepy. Sidnee wondered how long he would suck that thumb. She would not know. She would not see him grow up.

"Cassie, did that man scare you when he picked you up in the water?"

Cassie did not answer.

"Cassie? Did that man in the water scare you?"

Cassie looked at Sidnee with stoic blue eyes. "What man? Daddy got me loose off the boat."

On the television a boatload of mice burst into song. Cassie turned her gaze to the screen.

"I could read you a story," Sidnee said to the backs of her children. "Or we could play swing around. Want a swing around?"

The children didn't hear her. Sidnee put a hand on the top of their heads and lightly scratched their scalps, and they cuddled down into their pillows like kittens.

Sidnee sat on the couch and watched. A moment of Ben chopping and eating vegetables, eating as many as he chopped. Then the children, somnolent in front of the TV, smiles flickering across their looks of dazed concentration.

They would not understand why she had left. They would think she didn't love them anymore, that she was one of those mothers who felt tied down and walked away from her family. They might think someone had kidnapped her or killed her or who knows what. She would not see them grow up. She would not be there when they needed her. What if some kid bothered them in school? What if they had a mean teacher? What if they needed help learning to make the letter *A*?

Ben would take care of them. He might even remarry. Some nice lady who liked kids.

But nobody watched them like she did. Nobody loved them like she did. Nobody was tied to them like she was.

Her skin felt hot and sore. She was sunburned.

That night she did not sleep. She spent a long time standing by their beds; Ben, then Cassie, then Toby. After a while she couldn't even do that. She sat outside on the balcony, swamped by darkness, chilly in her cotton shorts and her T-shirt and Ben's gray sweater with the hole in the back. She watched the dark waves of the ocean, felt the breeze that came off the water, and her hair

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blew in the wind and got sticky with salt.

The night went on and on, and her thoughts went on and on. When morning came, she would not go. Suppose she didn't? If the point man could give her a husband and daughter, could he take them away again? Too risky to put to the test. She'd been serious when she'd offered her life for theirs. They were alive, and now she had to pay. And any price was worth it. And when the decision was settled in her mind, it would all start again. Suppose she did not go?

Then the sky lightened ever so slightly, and the tenseness of night drained into morning newness and ease. Sidnee got up and went inside.

She kissed Ben and Cassie and Toby very lightly on the cheek, afraid they would wake, and she would have to explain, and get stuck trying to get away. Even if she went to the grocery store alone, the children cried and held onto her legs.

She moved quietly out of the condo, locking the doorknob as she left, reluctantly leaving the dead bolts undone. She went down the steps to the pavement. The parking lot smelled like mildew, and was crammed full of cars from New York and New Jersey and Ohio. She hurried past the pool and onto the beach.

She walked a few feet, then stopped and looked over her shoulder at the sliding glass door of the condo. The curtain moved, and a little face pressed to the glass.

Cassie, watching her go.

Sidnee walked. The sand filled her flip-flops, and she took them off and carried them awhile, then threw them out into the water. The wind blew her hair and flapped the loose folds of sweater across her chest.

The sun was in her eyes, but she could make out someone walking toward her. A sea gull screamed, and she saw him. Black swim trunks, dirty blond hair, getting steadily closer and closer. Sidnee's breath came quickly. She had thought, maybe she was a little bit crazy, or a lot of bit crazy, and that he would not come, that he was not real.

She'd expected him to look different today, meaner. But the kindness in his face had not changed. She was drawn to him, and she trembled. He held out a hand.

"Ready?"

She dug her toe in the sand. "I don't . . . I'm not a good swimmer. I'm not sure I can do this."

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He looked at her sharply.

"I mean, that I'll be good at it." Oh hell, she was not going to cry. "I don't know what to do."

"You'll know what you need to know."

"But where will I live? Can I see my children or visit them? Why can't I take your place *and* be with them?"

"Take my hand," he said.

"We're going in the water?"

"Just take my hand and hold on and try not to fight it."

"Am I going underwater?"

He didn't answer.

"Am I going to drown?"

He didn't answer.

"Am I going to die?"

"Take my hand. It will be hard for a while. You'll be scared. But that will pass, and then you'll be peaceful."

"Please," she said.

He held out his hand, and she took it, and he led her into the water.

"It's *cold*," she said. She meant his hand, but was embarrassed she'd said it. "The water's cold. Let me get used to it. Maybe I should take my sweater off." She peeled off the sweater and threw it back on the sand.

She was shivering, and he put a steady hand on her shoulder. A cold, steady hand.

"Did someone do this to you? Did someone make you into this . . . saving person?"

He led her deeper into the water. "I was in a boat." His voice was soothing, and he urged her forward while he talked. "My son and I. A mile or so out from the shore. He was seven years old. My son. And a storm blew up, and we capsized."

The water lapped at Sidnee's knees. The point man tugged her hand, pulling her in deeper.

"I tried to save him. But it was raining, lightning and thunder, the ocean in a boil. I tried to hold his head up, but he panicked and was climbing all over me. After a while I sank, swallowing water, all the way down to the bottom. The whole while thinking about him sinking, and swallowing water. And I knew if I could only *save* him . . . I would do anything.

"And then I opened my eyes, and I was lying on the bottom on the sand.

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And I swam up to the surface and I found him — treading water and incoherent. I held him and swam all the way back to shore. And I carried him up out of the water and set him down on the beach."

The waves broke gently against Sidnee's waist.

"I remember laying him down in the sand, but I don't remember letting go of him. Then, the next thing I know, I was on the beach, and the whistles were blowing, and there was somebody else in trouble."

"Did you ever see your little boy again?" Sidnee asked.

The point man shook his head. "I know nothing about him. His life. What happened to him later or what he thought." He turned sideways, to hide his face from her. "I like to think that whenever he was in trouble, he could feel my arms around him."

"*Was* in trouble? Is he dead? What year was it, that you . . . left him?"

"It was 1946."

The point man was moving again, quicker this time, and the water rose to Sidnee's shoulders, then the tip of her chin. One more step, and it was over her head. He held her up — he was taller, he was a good swimmer. He held her head above water and pulled her farther out.

"He could still be alive," Sidnee said.

"He's dead. Not long ago. I know."

"How do you know?"

"*I just know.*"

"Will I know? About my children?"

"You'll know." He faced her, holding her shoulders, pushing backward and pressing her under.

Sidnee took a last gasp of air. She could still see his face, so kind and so sad, then the dark water rushed over her.

For a while she thought she might do it. His hands were gentle but hard, holding her down, steadying her as the waves washed over them. An easy, rhythmic drowning.

But she wanted air; she needed to breathe; she was afraid.

She seemed almost to explode with panic. She clawed his arms, and kicked and pushed, and poked her head out of the water. He was strong, but she was afraid, panicked, and she fought him till she realized that he was helping her, holding her up, keeping her head from the water.

"It's all right," he told her gently. "We can try it again. It's all right."

She stopped struggling, and he held her close to his wet, cold chest. Her

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stomach heaved, and she threw up the salt water she had swallowed, and the waves swelled and kept them dancing, and washed the vomit away. He pulled wet hair from her face. Chill comfort. She pushed him away.

"You made all this!" She shouted, the surf loud in her ears. "Why drag me into it? You made your deal, your setup, whatever it is."

"And you made yours."

"But I'm not a good swimmer! I'm afraid of the water!"

"I wasn't a good swimmer, either. I was afraid of the water." He moved away from her. "I'm not here to make you. What you do is up to you." He turned his back and left her.

She treaded water. She was tired, not sure she could make it to shore if she wanted to. She looked out to sea, and saw something surface — a dolphin? She looked to shore. There was nobody there. It was lonely here, so lonely. She didn't know what to do.

The point man was getting farther away. Somehow it was worse that he'd left her.

There had to be some way out. She knew him like she knew herself. There had to be something she could do.

And a voice echoed in her mind. Her own voice, talking to her mother.

"When does it stop?" Sidnee had asked her. "How long will it be before I can relax and not worry? How old do the kids have to be?"

And her mother's laugh, slightly malicious. "You'll always worry; there's always something. I still worry about you. And even worse, there's the grandchildren. And the cycle starts again."

The point man stopped and turned around. He disappeared behind a wave.

It was her turn now. Until her children grew up and died, and she found somebody else. Only what if her children had children? Wouldn't she want to be point man, just in case they drowned? How likely was it to happen? Could she afford to take that risk?

Just like her mother had told her. The cycle begins again.

And she knew, then, that she had him. Because she knew him like she knew herself.

"Wait!"

His back was to her. He was too far away.

"Wait a minute. Please!" She swam, trying to catch him. "Maybe your son had children!" The surf was thunderous, squashing her words. Her throat hurt, but she yelled louder. "Did you think of that? Maybe he had children. That

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means you have grandchildren. Shouldn't you be here if they need you? Do you think anybody —" She swallowed water and coughed. "Do you think I can do this as well as you can? Look at me! I can barely keep my head up!"

He kept moving away. Did he hear her?

"This is *your* responsibility, not mine!"

A wave crashed over her head, and she went under. She struggled up and gasped for air, but got a mouthful of water. Another wave broke. The current pulled her sideways, but she swam to the surface. She got a quick gulp of air before the next wave swamped her. A gush of colder water grabbed her hard and suddenly, driving her down to the bottom, pulling her sideways in the sand, till her knees were scaped raw and bloody.

She kicked and jerked and pumped her arms. She needed air: she had to breathe; she had to breathe *now*. Something grabbed her, and she fought and scratched, and then she was up, out of the water, her head in the air she could breathe.

His skin was cold; his arms were strong; he carried her through the surf. He put her down in the warm, dry sand and went to his knees beside her. His legs and belly were coated with sand. He leaned close, his face next to hers.

"You're alive," he said.

"Is it over?"

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her up. "I gave you your child and your husband. You could have given me . . . ease. You could have given me peace."

What was it she had said?" What last-minute thing had she shouted?

"But you're right," he told her. "It is my responsibility."

She looked at him. "You could lie down on the bottom of the ocean. Let the water close over your head."

He smiled at her. He couldn't. They both knew that.

He let go of her arms and got up quickly. She turned sideways and watched him go. The sun was in her eyes.

He was wrong. She couldn't give him peace. She couldn't give him ease. He could find those only from within. And she knew how hard that was. If the point man had his own private hell, so did she.

She lay back down in the sand. In a minute, she would get up; in a minute, she would go back. She remembered suddenly that she had forgotten to warn Ben that the water temperature in the condo was set too high. It came out of the taps hot, and one of the kids could get burned. She remembered Cassie,

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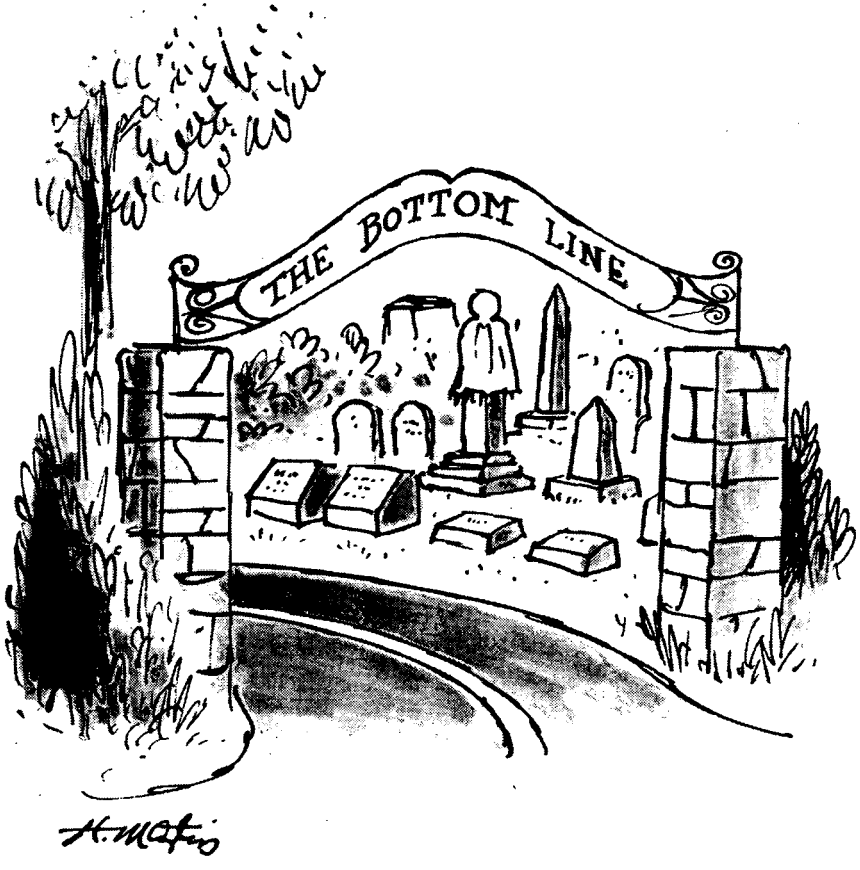
watching her from the sliding glass door. Had it been locked? Could Cassie squeeze through the balcony rail?

Water slid under her hand, then ran back out through the sand. The urge to jump up and run back to the children was strong, and the muscles twitched in her legs.

She closed her eyes, savoring the sun on her face and the air in her lungs. Let it go — just this once, just for a minute. The water would come rushing back. It always did.



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Although "Still Life With Doves" marks Rand B. Lee's first appearance in these pages, he has had an involvement with F&SF *for a long time. His father, Manfred B. Lee, co-author of the Ellery Queen detective novels, was a close friend of the magazine's first editor, Anthony Boucher, and was involved with Mercury Press while* F&SF *was in the embryonic state.*

Rand has followed in the family writing tradition. His short fiction has appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Amazing Stories, The 1984 World's Best SF, *and* The Year's Best Science Fiction (First Annual Collection).

Still Life With Doves

By Rand B. Lee

LAST EVENING WE WENT down to Lake Villiers to watch the snow doves break out of the ice. Gerard de Montfort was there, looking handsome and sardonic; so was his loathsome little cousin Marget, in a scarlet kimono. She's an albino this month, and one of her ears is much larger than the other. "So how many pregnancies does *this* make, Mathilde?" she asked me, straight away. I simply smiled. Marget's present eyes are pinkish-red, like a ferret's. They suit her.

The snow doves were late, which made my husband Anton cross. He is a tall man with harsh planes to his face. Anton kept snapping at our guide: "Are you *certain* this is the right place?"

"Most certain, sir."

"Are you *certain*?"

"Most certain, sir. It has never been known to fail since Year One of the Colony."

They went on and on like this. From time to time, Gerard looked up from

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the endorphin pipe he was sharing with Marget and flashed me a smile of amused contempt. He had asked me to marry him once upon a time, on that backwater world where all our troubles had begun, long, long ago before our incarceration here. "See what you have saddled yourself with?" his smile said. I pretended not to notice, but after a while I could bear it no longer. Wrapping my cloak more closely around me, I picked my way down to the lake-edge alone.

The snow furred the smooth round tumbled stones of the beach, but the surface of the lake was entirely free of it. Ice is so often portrayed by artists as white, or gray, or blue, but the lake-ice was a deep unconscious green, the coldest color in the worlds. Marya di Talavaya captures the feel of it perfectly in the second movement of her *Dance of the Three Fears*; so does Wu Chien Lem in his diatonic *Ox-Tongue Study*. But I have never seen the color precisely reproduced on canvas. Perhaps I will attempt it.

I looked out across the lake to the pale farther shore and the vague mountains beyond. The circumpolar shield glimmered softly near the horizon. We were far enough north that the sun didn't set in the winter; the sky was bright and blank, casting few shadows. I hugged the child swelling in my abdomen, and it kicked vigorously. *I will name you Columba if you are a boy, Paloma if you are a girl,* I promised it. *Columba of the snows; Paloma of the White Hand. We will go far away together, and live in great ice caves at magnetic north, watching the translunar ferries flare beyond the shield. The snow doves will sing to us in the mornings, and we will light no fires. We will be radiance and warmth enough. And we will forget that we are prisoners, like everybody else.* It was all nonsense, of course. I have never seen any of my children.

Anton was at my elbow, doing his duty. "Lady, are you well?" he asked.

I kept my eyes on the horizon. "As well as can be expected under the circumstances," I said. What I wanted to do was scream at him, *"I am sixty Standard years old and in my thirty-fourth enforced pregnancy, Anton. I am as 'well' as our keepers permit."* But this would have been rude. When you have no hope, etiquette must serve.

"We ought not to have come," he said. I was pleased by the bitterness in his tone. I turned to search his face, hungry for more revelations of pain, but he had already begun to move away, back to the others, lean shoulders hunched. His long, dead hands hung from his sleeves. I tried to recall the time

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when I had loved him enough to leave my enlightened home world for his strife-chewed oppressive one. "You are a physician," he had said to me. "My people need you." It had seemed important, then.

Only years later did I realize that I had fallen in love not with him, but with his sculptures. People on my world fell in love for reasons like that. One of his carved urns is on display at the museum at Joievivre, an ephemeral, gasping thing of blue micaceous tuff. After we were married, Anton divided his time between making art and constructing the intricate, primitive explosive devices our cadre used to annoy his planet's reigning government. Then they caught us, took away his hands, and shipped us here, denying him cell reconstruction and prosthetics. He nearly killed me when he discovered I had brought one of his pots along. After that, my interest in him waned, but forms must be observed.

Up the slope, Marget and Gerard were throwing snowballs at one another, Gerard ineffectually, Marget with deadly accuracy. A snowball caught Gerard full in the cravat, making him open and close his mouth in indignation. He cannot speak, of course — for his crimes of eloquence, our keepers removed his vocal cords — but Marget made plenty of noise for both of them. With typical theatricality, she fell back into the snow shrieking with laughter. Her scarlet kimono pooled about her like fresh blood. Her skin was almost exactly the color of the snow. I wondered suddenly what it would feel like to hold her head under water until her eyes popped.

I began to perspire profusely under my cloak, and my vision blurred. *Peace and calm,* I thought automatically. *Breathe and release.* I breathed as we have all been taught, because I knew that I was only seconds away from the cramps our keepers send us when we are too naughty. As I breathed, I watched our guide trudge to my husband's side and point out toward the lake. Gerard slouched over to hear. Marget lay in the snow where she had fallen, no longer laughing. With pleasure I noticed her closed eyes, her chest's careful rise and fall. She was fighting off naughtiness as well.

I wondered what she would look like when I saw her next. A lifetime of enforced random cosmetic surgery cannot be pleasant, but it is fitting, considering her crime. She was the cadre member who had turned us all in. I will never forget her dismay upon learning that our enemy despised turncoats as much as we. *Breathe and release.*

My rage ebbed, and the danger of cramps receded. Following the guide's

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point, I could barely make out on the far side of the lake a smudge of light, sparkling like the mica in Anton's urn. It was the beginning of the phosphene dance. The snow doves were at last near birth.

Marget got up and joined the others. I stayed where I was, scanning the ice. Its dark green depths began to glimmer, first in one spot, then another; then the entire lake was gleaming and glowing and swirling with knots of radiance. At each phosphene nexus, the ice began to heave and buckle with the sound of rifle shots. Cracks appeared in the surface, leaking phosphenes like ichor from the Divine Mother's wounds. Then there was absolute silence, as though a blanket had been thrown over the world.

Into that silence, the snow doves arose, silent and straight as missiles, electric as answered prayer. All over the lake they rose, as one. Up, up they rose, their phosphenes spattering us. When the flock had climbed about thirty feet above the lake surface, wings opened. From perfect linearity, the snow doves expanded into flowers of light. And they danced and sang.

It is possible to describe the dance of the snow doves, but it is impossible to convey the feel of it to those who have not witnessed it first-hand. Scientists say that there are measurable changes in the electromagnetic field of the brain when humans view the dance; certainly one feels transported, entirely taken out of oneself. No one really knows how much of this euphoria is due to the phosphenes, the dance, or the doves' singing.

I suppose I must point out that snow doves are not doves and they do not really sing; like Gerard, they have no vocal cords. And strictly speaking, humans cannot *hear* dovesong at all. We perceive it as a subcutaneous feathering, a vibration under the skin, like trembling kisses at the hollow of the throat. The Damanakippith/'fy, to whom dovesong is audible, call it a "tesseract vocalization," claiming that it extends into a number of dimensions which cannot be described in linear terms. But nobody understands half the things the Damanakippith/'fy say or do.

Wheeling and spiraling, the snow doves rose toward heaven. Swept away, I rose with them. As we ascended, other flocks joined us. My perceptions stretched into odd wavelengths. I could smell the cities of Humanity glowing below us, poisonously warm. As we pierced the primary cloud layers, I could smell the intensified ultraviolets as our wings absorbed them, and I could feel changes triggered in our bodies. Then, as clearly and distinctly as though it were happening to me personally, I felt the call of the

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planet's magnetics, pulling and turning us toward the ancient migration.

The shield did not stop us. Its exotic currents, which would have fried the synapses of an unprotected human, passed over us harmlessly. We burst into the deep blue vastness. We were free, free at last. I wept with joy and rage, reaching for the stars, my good golden home, the calm palaces of reason in whose halls I had been raised.

But all at once, I saw again the faces of the women who had come to me, creeping, under cover of darkness, begging to be freed from the pregnancies rape or mischance had thrust upon them. I was a physician; I knew abortion was illegal in Anton's culture, but it had never occurred to me that the service I performed might be considered a revolutionary act. Ironically, it had been for this and not my connection to the cadre that I had been condemned.

Snow doves have neither tear ducts nor uteruses. I snapped back to myself, so abruptly that I shrieked. I found I still stood at the empty lake-edge, under an empty sky. The shattered ice had already begun to freeze over. My shriek reverberated and died. Up the bank, Anton had fallen to his knees. His face was anguished, an open, raw wound, his eyes screwed tight. Gerard had his back turned to us. Marget was curled in the snow, vomit staining her kimono. Near the car, our guide observed us without expression.

The baby kicked and kicked. I turned from the lake and started walking back up the slope. Marget did not move. I walked past her fetal form and stooped to take my husband's arm. Anton jerked his eyes open. I said, "Gerard, care for your cousin. Anton, get up."

They obeyed me, as people usually do when I bother to assert myself. Somehow I got everyone loaded into the car, and we returned to the City. It was high time. My usual Caesarian and refertilization were scheduled for the next afternoon, and I wanted to look my best.

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Julia Ecklar writes that "Promised Lives" evolved from a question "about what sort of regulations would be required to control population growth in restricted environments. That led me to wondering what ways people would find to weasel around those rules (since people manage to do that no matter how well constructed the system)."

Julia was a nominee for the 1991 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. "Promised Lives" marks her first appearance in F&SF.

Promised Lives

By Julia Ecklar

"YOU MUST UNDERSTAND," the Population Bureau woman says, wanting desperately to pacify my weeping husband. I reach across to stroke his face and feel the fever of his grief through my palm.

"Five years, you said." Xiao looks up from the manicured grass, his face red and wet in the station's well-simulated sunlight. "Outdoor" offices, fresh grass, and controlled weather are some of the reasons we relocated to Haven all those years ago. The reasons *I* relocated, at least. Not Xiao. "After five years," he says, "you promised we could have children."

"No, Xiao." I take his arm in shaking fingers, make him look at me. "They told us we were *eligible* for children after five years. No one promised anything." I should never have brought him to the Population Bureau, never should have let him hope while there was still some chance of failure.

He hugs my hand to his face. "It isn't fair." I can't beat back the guilt his grief awakens in me.

"Haven Station reached its target population two and a half years ago,"

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the broker explains patiently, gently. "Applications for family expansions will still be taken, of course, and you and your wife are sure to be considered very favorably when and if new expansion permits are issued." I wonder if Xiao will mistake the bewilderment in her smile for soft sadness. "Until that time, maybe you should remind yourselves why you came to Haven, and why it has to be this way."

Xiao and I walk home from the Population Bureau's arboretum-offices, arm in arm. Too sick with grief to see his surroundings, Xiao doesn't resist when I lead him through the long back routes, away from the bright thoroughfares and the people who might see us and take pity on our failure. Our footsteps fill the open spaces with a ringing that is almost silence. I long for him to join me in enjoying that empty sound.

In the corridor just before our house, we pass our neighbor, Anna Karras. The passage is so wide, we don't even have to turn sideways to let her by. She draws her wrinkled face into a tissue paper grimace, accusing Xiao with her spinster's eyes. "Didn't get it, did you?"

I shake my head. I don't think Xiao even hears her.

"Then what's he crying about?" she demands as we pass and leave her to wasp her bitterness at our backs. "Doesn't he remember what it was like back home?"

I bite back an evil answer as I key open our house's front door. He remembers — no one on Haven forgets what made them abandon Earth to come here.

We just have trouble agreeing on the reasons for it. That's all.

I never forget.

Awake in our bed, staring into a darkness polished harder and deeper than it could ever get on Earth, I remember how frightened I was the first time I slept in a silent, lightless cavern, with a bed all to myself. I'd cried just like Xiao cries in the living room now, afraid I'd gone insane and simply forgotten I shared my room with sixteen other children and adults. But I hadn't forgotten. I never forget.

Before Haven Station, I lived in Morgantown, West Virginia. The police killed a family there when I was six, dragged them out of their living cell because they hadn't reported household deaths to the city. No one ever located bodies, though. Even at such a young age, I understood that the family

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had eaten them. It seemed foolish to me that anyone should be punished for making such good use of dead bodies at a time when none of us had any food. The whole business never came to a trial, though — the entire family was killed in the riot over their living space even as the police tried to take them away. I forget their names, or even whether anyone else ate them after making sure they were all killed. But I'll never forget my fury at realizing we weren't even allowed tiny efforts to improve our wretched lot.

I crawl out of bed and leave the room to go searching for Xiao. There are four separate rooms I could search, if I wanted to. There is fresh, living grass in the hallways, walls that I can't touch two at the same time. I sometimes feel almost strangled by the openness, and I love it.

Xiao huddles among the philodendron, no longer crying. He looks emptied and fragile, as though he's lost all tears, and when I climb over the seat to sit beside him, he rests his head against my breast. "Oh, Maia...."

I kiss the top of his head and hold him. "There's always later."

"I don't believe in later. I've spent my whole life wanting this later, and now that it's here, they tell me no." His fingers twine with mine, trembling like unfurled flowers.

I'd only ever seen live dandelions before moving with Xiao to Haven. "We could apply for transfer to another station. We both have marketable skills, and there must be openings somewhere." But I secretly hope not, so strongly that the backlash from it nearly kills me.

"How far will we run before it's far enough?" Xiao stirs within my arms. "We could always just ignore the Bureau, go ahead and have the baby anyway."

I slap him so violently, he knocks the philodendron from its stand and spills dirt all over the floor in trying to scurry away. Just as quickly, my hands fly to my mouth and we stare at each other in shared expressions of horror. I can't recall ever being violent before.

"It's only one baby," Xiao whispers, eyes huge. "It can live here with us. No one has to know."

"No," I say through my hands. "Don't ever say that, Xiao. You told me Beijing was worse than Morgantown, that you lived in a drawer until you were twelve! That all starts with just one baby."

Tears make his eyes look clouded, and he falls against me with fresh wetness on his face. "Everything starts with children," he whispers. "Why

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do we live together — why do we love — if it isn't to make a child who can share all the things we've come to Haven to gain?"

The thought makes my stomach hurt, so I make it go away. I don't know how to answer him. I don't know how to answer myself.

Next morning, I leave my home workstation before my habitual lunch break and go to the Personnel Office to ask about a transfer. Xiao is gone on some business-related errand. I'm too shaken by a feeling of horribleness about these actions to want Xiao's help or sensitivities where I have to see and deal with them. I hurry to leave our neighborhood before he can run into me on his way back home.

Personnel is big, plant-riddled, and sweet smelling, just like everywhere else on Haven. The sound of human voices makes a pleasing murmur when mixed with the burble of dancing water and the shush of vent-born breezes. I stand for longer than I should, watching a honeybee labor over each blossom on a yellow chrysanthemum.

I don't know where they got many of Haven's loveliest accoutrements. Perhaps botany and biology labs retained samples enough to recreate the pleasant things humanity crowded off their home planet. I wonder if the other stations are this gentle and beautiful — if they still fill rapidly with people from Earth wanting their own chance to live uncrowded and responsible, like Xiao and me. The bee flies away, and I watch it as far as I can.

Selfishness wells over me with a throb of heartsick pain. I can't give this away. It's hateful, I know, but my bones ache to breaking if I so much as think about risking anyplace this beautiful, this real. I don't want some other station that I might not come to love. I want Haven, and the life I have here, and I want Xiao to want it with me.

I go home without seeing anyone at Personnel. I hope that Xiao will understand. He can't make a baby on Haven without me, though, so I at least know nothing awful will happen while I try to make him see the beauty in what I've chosen.

Police wait outside my house when I return. Remembering the family back in Morgantown, I have to clench my teeth together to keep from gasping. These police greet me pleasantly, though, and ask me how well I knew my neighbor, Anna Karras.

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"Not very well," I tell them. Haven's greatest gift to us is privacy. I try very hard to respect that treasure.

"Can you think of any reason why Ms. Karras would want to kill herself?"

"Kill herself?" How could anyone survive into old age somewhere like the ruined Earth, just to kill themselves in the pollen-scented tunnels of Haven Station? "Maybe she wanted to die someplace beautiful, while she still remembered enough about Earth to appreciate what she was leaving."

They thank me for my comments, but I can tell they don't believe me. They ask if they can call me again, should they have any further questions. Of course, I tell them. But I don't really expect anyone to call. Such things are a formality, surely.

Xiao is home, waiting far back in the bedroom as though afraid to be accidentally found. I can tell by his tiny frown that he's heard about Anna Karras. "Xiao," I say when he moves into my hug. "We need to talk about the baby."

"I know." But his voice is eager and frightened, not an answer to my statement at all. "That's why I did it, Maia — don't you see?"

I feel my hands go still and cold. "Did what?"

"Anna Karras." He whispers the name like a bee buzz in my ear. "One less person means there's room for one more baby. She was old, she was hateful. She looked forward to dying, Maia, she said so hundreds of times. Isn't it worth losing someone like her to give our baby its only chance? Isn't it?"

I can't think clearly with Xiao in my arms and Anna Karras lying dead only one house unit away. I tell him to wait for me, to not even think about leaving our home. I go to prowl the open corridors without him, to look at all the greenery and emptiness, and to think about my husband's desperation.

THE FOLIAGE in the Population Bureau's offices is dusted with white and pink clouds of growing baby's breath. The tiny blossoms have no scent that I can find, and I can't remember if I've noticed them before. They're startlingly beautiful against the walls of darker green.

I hate myself for being here. The population broker smiles at me as though I hadn't sat here just yesterday while my husband sobbed on her grassy

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carpet. "My neighbor died," I blurt, not knowing how else to start this awful discussion.

She nods an understanding nod, eyes sympathetic in a detached, practiced kind of way. "Yes, the Bureau heard right away, of course. Did you know her well?"

Why does everyone seem to think that's important? "We didn't know her much at all. But she's dead now." And surely being here was even more wrong than killing her. "You said Xiao and I had to wait until some change in the population figures before we'd be considered for a baby. They're changed now, aren't they?" Do I have the right to judge the strength of my husband's longing? If Anna Karras had died of natural causes, there would be nothing wrong with my coming here. There should be nothing wrong with it now. Who decides which dreams are right and which are wrong?

I didn't ask Xiao to do this.

"I'm sorry," the broker says. Her eyebrows lift high in surprise. "I didn't mean to mislead you. Yes, you and your husband are certainly eligible for parenthood, but I'm afraid Ms. Karras was already promised."

I feel my insides tighten as though my womb has clenched in hope. "Promised?"

She places her hands flat on her desk top, settling back in her chair as if for a long explanation. "There are many couples like yourselves on Haven, all waiting for openings, either because of transfers or death. In some cases, the couples have arranged with friends or relatives to have their lives, well...." She looks oddly embarrassed and won't glance up to meet my eyes. "Their lives on the station are already promised—when they die, someone is already lined up to take their place. Ms. Karras promised her life to a couple in Ring 3 last April. They've already been contacted about permission to conceive."

My head spins in tight, airy circles. "Anyone can do this?"

"Yes, of course."

"I could tell you now that I want my death to count toward Xiao's and my child, and my eggs would be allowed to germinate the moment I'm no longer alive?"

She blinks as though caught by a very bright light, and pulls her hands down into her lap. "Well, yes...But that's a very unusual circumstance under which to make such a promise."

"Can I make this promise any time?" I persist. "At any moment right

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up to the very point of my own death?"

"Yes." She leans forward conspiratorially and asks, "Why? Is there something you feel you should tell me?"

My hands are very still now, my insides warm and waiting. I nod and smooth the front of my tunic where it has been rumpled by my labored breathing. "My husband, Xiao — he murdered Anna Karras."

Xiao was delighted. He went with the police knowing they would put him to death when he explained what he'd done, and why. We signed the promissory papers together, and Xiao pressed his cheek to my stomach with tears for his promised daughter. "I don't need to see her," he told me the last time I saw him alive. "I'll live on in her, and that's all that matters."

No, Xiao. Not all.

The bees in the arboretum matter. The water that splashes down the layers of a public fountain matters. The grass, the wide open halls, the odorless clumps of baby's breath — all of those matter just as much as your genetic imperative and our four empty household rooms.

I'm glad you could finally have what you wanted, that you went to your death happy to have earned the right to sire a daughter. I'm also glad that not all rights have to be exercised, and that I could gift you that measure of contentment without being forced to override my own selfish fears and give birth to anyone new. You died believing your daughter would be born, and I live on knowing that I never intended her to be. I lie here on the floor of our empty living room, intoxicated by the silence and the cleanness, and I am at peace with the outcome of my terrible decision.

Could you have said the same, my dear, if you'd lived to see the outcome of yours?

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

CALCULATING THE FUTURE

ONLY THE past is truly knowable. Sometimes, though, not even the past is available — seldom do we preserve good records of people and events. The present is a millisecond wide, the future a fog.

Or is it better to say that there is no single future? Rather, we can best regard the future as a set of possibilities. Science fiction is an entertaining game, aiming to make us aware of the vast ocean of potentiality we face. As fiction, it strives harder to entertain than to instruct. Is there a more orderly way to discuss the range of the probable?

This goal is not scientific, in the sense that the results cannot be checked right now. This is not the same as *un*scientific statements — those which have been tested and have failed.

Rather, ideas of the future are *non*scientific. However systematically arrived at, they cannot be tested today. Someday they will be either disproved or not. But of course, like a tip about a horse race, they are most useful before you know whether they are right.

Consider cryonics. This idea, that properly freezing people immediately after they have crossed the threshold we call "death" may allow them to be later reanimated, is an assertion about the future. It first figured in a Neil R. Jones sf story in the 1931 *Amazing Stories*, inspiring Dr. Robert Ettinger to propose the idea eventually in detail in *The Prospect of Immortality* (1964).

It has since been explored in Clifford Simak's *Why Call Them Back From Heaven?* (1967), Fred Pohl's *The Age of the Pussyfoot* (1969), and in innumerable space flight stories (such as *2001: A Space Odyssey)* which use cryonics for long term storage of the crew. Fred Pohl

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became a strong advocate of cryonics, even appearing on the Johnny Carson show to discuss it. Robert Heinlein used cryonics as part of a time-traveling plot in *The Door Into Summer.* Larry Niven coined "corpsicle" to describe such "deanimated" folk. All these stories considered the long term aspects.

Sterling Blake's *Chiller,* which should appear this summer, is different. It treats cryonics as the field exists today, in a more mainstream, suspenseful plot structure. *Chiller's* armature is the adventures of a beleaguered band facing the present opposition to the idea. It is based on the three existing cryonics organizations and the considerable antagonism they face, much of it quite emotional.

This fervently felt resistance suggests a deep underlying uneasiness about death in our society. Imagine a scientist today being rejected from a scientific society because he wants to present research relevant to long-term preservation of whole organisms, not necessarily humans. Yet this continues, as well as widespread views that cryonics is inherently wrong, greedy, or else the work of con men. (This last assumption is universal among physicians.)

Of course, cryonics is a huge gamble. And many thoughtful people discount cryonics because they simply consider it fantastically implausible. This, despite the fact that Canadian painted turtles and four species of frogs routinely make it through the winter by freezing, then reviving. They respond to low temperatures by making up a cocktail of glucose, amino acids and a kind of naturally produced antifreeze, glycerol. They manage to move water out of their cells, so that ice crystals form outside delicate membranes. While these animals have special adaptations, their body chemistries are not bizarre. Their methods could be extended artificially to mammals, like us.

Based on such reasoning, cryonics has gathered momentum, largely unnoticed by the world. The number of people who invest in cryonics as a rational gamble is increasing exponentially. Over forty are now suspended in liquid nitrogen, with hundreds signed up to be.

Many others regard cryonics as creepy and pointless. Even science fiction writers fascinated by its long-term aspects (Simak, Heinlein) never made arrangements to be "suspended," as the cryonicists say. I know of no sf writer who has publicly endorsed cryonics as a plausible possibility, with the exception of a deposition Arthur C. Clarke made several years ago to

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support a court case.

Of course the notion calls up images of the cold grave, zombies, etc. Still, as eerie ideas go, being frozen strikes me as less horrific than turning into food for worms, or being cremated. (When cremation started out commercially, bodies were burned during a church service. The businesses quickly added organ music, because mourners wondered about the loud bang that often interrupted the funeral. It was the skull of the deceased, exploding.)

So if not especially creepy, is it none the less pointless? That is, are cryonicists making a reasonable bet?

That depends on many factors. Any vision of the future does. To analyze them in more than an arm-waving way, I'll work out here a simple method for quantitatively thinking about future possibility.

The simplest way to consider any proposed idea is to separate it into smaller, better-defined puzzles. This atomizing of issues is crucial to science, since it is easier to ponder one problem at a time. This approach has been applied to nonscientific questions, many closely allied to science.

The central question of SETI, the Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence, is the calculation of how many technological civilizations may exist in our galaxy now. Estimating this factors out such issues as how likely it is that a star has livable planets, and how long a civilization lasts, on average. Nobody expects the estimate to be a hard, concrete result. It is really a way of discussing the elements which entered into the past, not the future, to yield the present density of radio-using aliens.

The same techniques can be applied to future possibilities. This was first done for cryonics by Dale Warren, an engineer, and sharpened by a UCLA physician, Steve Harris.

I'm going to have to use equations here, but they'll be simple. So will my method. If every issue I raise is independent of the other questions, then we can simply multiply all the probability estimates together at the end to get the total likelihood of cryonics working.

What kind of concerns enter here? I'll break them down into three categories — the metaphysical, the social, and the technical. Most sf has dealt with the social aspects, because that generates the most interesting stories, but the other matters are equally vexing.

First, the metaphysical. To preserve people's minds, we naturally think of saving their brains. What are the chances that the brain carries the mind? This is the materialistic world

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view, and the chances that it is correct I'll label with a probability *M*. I'm a solid materialist, so I'd say that *M*=.99, i.e., 99% chance that some vital soul does not leave the body when metabolism stops. There is evidence for this, actually. People cooled down to a state of clinical death on operating tables, for brain surgery, revive with their sense of self intact.

Next, what are the odds that our brain *structure* tells the whole story? That is, that your Self is not the product of continuing electrical activity in the brain. Here, too, the cooled patients seem to show that though their brain rhythms cease, they persist when revived.

Further, some people have gotten jolts of heavy current which completely swamped their delicate internal electrical circuits. This happens to hundreds of people struck by lightning every year in the U.S., and occurred in routine shock treatments earlier in this century. They survived with memory intact, except for short term recall. Our minds, then, are something like hardwired, though rewritable programs inscribed in the cells of our brains. So I'll set this probability that our Essence is in brain cells, not momentary brain activity, at *E*=.99.

Finally, there is a chance that your Self can make it through the process of being frozen down to liquid nitrogen temperatures. The trick is to get to the brain quickly, before it degrades. Several years ago a boy survived drowning in a cold lake, reviving after an hour spent clinically dead. Even if cryonically suspended immediately — which means being perfused with a glycerol-type solution to minimize damage while being cooled — there lurk the huge unknowns of what this perfusion does to your memories. Studies show that the most damage is done when brains are rewarmed. Neuronal membranes are ripped, pierced. Even so, experimental animals revive with memories intact. And the perfusion technology will certainly improve. Let's be optimistic and put the probability that the Self will persist through this Transition process, *T*, at *T*=0.9.

Then the metaphysical factors, *MET*=(.99)(.99)(.9), or just about 0.9.

Next, the social issues. First, what are the odds that your brain (and body, presumably — but the Self is in the brain, remember) will make it to some far off revival time without some accident thawing you out. Call this *S*, the chances for Survival of your brain.

Many issues enter here. Presently, all cryonics patients are kept indoors, in steel containers, carefully

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watched. This hasn't always been so; financial failures doomed several to thawing in the two decades after Ettinger's pioneering book. But none have been lost in over a decade, and the first man frozen (named Bedford, incidentally) is still coasting along at 77 degrees above absolute zero after 26 years. Given that cryonics is far more sturdy now, let me set the brain survival odds at S=0.9.

Sure, one can say, but what about the odds that society as a *whole* will make it through for, say, a century? Call this factor O, the Odds against civilization itself being rich enough to not make cryonics impossible. This includes the chances that society will turn irrational, or break down (war, economic depression), or will take a fervent dislike to cryonics itself.

The economics of cryonics are modest. Liquid nitrogen is the third cheapest fluid, after water and crude oil, and is widely useful, so it will probably be available in even damaged economies. Of course, even democracies can decide to suppress those arrogant enough to spend their money on a chancy voyage across time into an unknown future. So I will set the Odds of social continuity allowing cryonics at O=.8.

Ah, but what if the cryonics organizations themselves don't last? This is a real worry, because the collapse of Cryonic Interment Inc. in California during the mid-1970s lost those earlier suspended patients.

The longest lived institutions in human history have been religious, with the Catholic church arguably holding the record at nearly 2000 years. Cryonics has some of the aura of a religion, with deeply persuaded people sustaining a long-range hope of personal salvation. Maybe that will help.

Still, greedy corporate directors could someday simply find it more profitable to keep tapping the assets left behind by the patients, rather than investing in reviving them. (See Simak's *Why Call Them Back From Heaven?* for a plausible argument that this would indeed occur.)

Or somebody could simply embezzle the funds. The more popular cryonics becomes, the bigger will be the spoils. Call this probability of cryonics organization failure C, and my guess is that C=0.5 — a fifty-fifty chance that the whole shebang will go under. After all, we're talking about a wait that could be a century. How many of today's corporations are that old? About one percent.

These social factors I estimate at SOC=(0.9)(0.8)(0.5)=0.36, or a bit better than a third.

I can hear the tech types impa-

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tiently asking, *can it be done at all?* And there's the rub. From the METaphysical to SOCial factors we come to the issues which blend the two—is revival technically possible, given the social and philosophical assumptions?

Cryonics began with no clear idea of how revival could be done. That gave rise to a standard joke, about how many cryonicists it took to screw in a light bulb. The answer was none — they just sit in the dark and wait for the technology to improve.

The rise of nanotechnology at the hands of Eric Drexler over the last decade has made him the patron saint of cryonics. Drexler envisions self-replicating machines of molecular size, programmed with orders to repair freezing damage, bind up torn membranes, and generally knit together the sundered house of a frozen brain.

There appears to be no fundamental physical reason why such tiny machines can't be made on the scale of a billionth (nano-) of a meter. The rewards of developing such handy devices would be immense, a revolution in human society (which is why the SOC issues intertwine with the tech ones, as I'll discuss below).

Not only must this marvelous technology appear, but we must survive its flowering. This is tricky; runaway use of nanotech could produce virulent diseases or everything-eaters that could wipe us out. Modern, Promethean technology, like nuclear physics, shares this daunting property.

I suspect that we will take at least fifty years, and more plausibly a century, to develop nanotech able to repair freezing damage. The good thing about being frozen is that you aren't going anywhere; you can afford to wait.

Given these immense uncertainties, I put the chances that the Technology will arrive and we will survive it at T=0.5.

But of course, a future society must have the *desire* to apply the technology to cryonics. If we do not yield to a kind of temporo-centric insulation, and cease to be curious about representatives from a century before, I suspect we will have the cultural Energy to work out nanotech for cryonics purposes. (After all, much of it will be useful in curing and repairing ordinary, living people.) So I put this cultural Energy probability, E, at E=0.9.

Still, will they pay the bill? The first few revived cryonicists will probably get onto the 22nd century's talk shows. Famous suspended people, too. (Wouldn't you pay a few bucks

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to talk to Benjamin Franklin? He was the first American to speculate on means for preserving people for later revival. And the philosopher Francis Bacon died of pneumonia caught experimenting with suspension of animals.) But if there are ten thousand cryonicists waiting to be thawed....

This is a major, imponderable problem. Humanitarians will argue that spending money on the living is always morally superior to spending it on the dead-but-salvageable. Will this argument win the day? Or, in the fullness of time, will nanotech make revival so cheap that the cost factor, *C*, becomes a non-issue? You can argue it either way — and science fiction writers already have.

Given such uncertainties, I'll guess that the cost probability factor C=0.5.

Finally, there is the truly unknowable factor, *H*, which stands for the contrariness of Humans. Some powerful social force may emerge which makes cryonics reprehensible. After all, many think it's creepy, a kind of Stephen King idea.

Maybe people will utterly lose interest in the past. I doubt this, noting that the world was fascinated with the frozen man found in the Alps in 1991. Considerable expense is going into careful examination of this remarkably preserved inhabitant of about 4000 years ago, and his clothing and belongings will tell us much about his era — but still, he can't speak, as a revived cryonicist could.

Or perhaps some other grand issue will captivate human society, making cryonics and the whole problem of death irrelevant. Maybe we'll lose interest in technology itself. Factor in also the Second Coming of Christ, or arrival of aliens who spirit us all away — the choices are endless.

But all rather unlikely, I suspect. I'm rather optimistic about Humanity, so I'll take the odds that we'll still care about suspended cryonicists to be fairly large, perhaps H=0.9.

This means that the *TECH* issues multiply out to (0.5)(0.9)(0.5)(0.9)=0.2.

All this homework done, we can now savor our final result. The probability that cryonics will work, delivering you to a high-tech future, blinking in astonishment, is

MET x SOC x TECH = 0.07

A seven percent chance.

Do I "believe" this number? Of course not. Such calculations are worthwhile only if they sharpen our thinking, not as infallible guides. Some decry numerical estimates as hopelessly deceptive, too exact in matters which are slippery and qualitative. True, for some, but the goal

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here is to use some simple arithmetic means of assessing, then planning. This does not rule out emotional issues, it merely places them in perspective.

Still, to wax numerical a bit more, suppose you regard cryonics purely as an investment. Does it yield a good return?

Well, what's a person worth? Most Americans will work about fifty years at a salary in the range of around $20,000 to $30,000 per year — that is the national average today. In other words, they will make somewhere between one and two million dollars in their lifetime.

One crude way to size up an investment is to take the probability of success (7% in our estimate here) times the expected return (a million dollars). Then compare with the amount you must invest to achieve your aim. This yields $70,000, which is in the range of what cryonics costs today. (Cryonicists buy a life insurance policy which pays off their organization upon their death; they don't finance it all at once.)

The goal of cryonics is not money but time — a future life. Another way to see if cryonics is a rational gamble is to take a person's expected life span (75 years) and divide it by the expected gain in years if they are revived in the future. This would be at least another 75 years, but if the technology for revival exists, people may quite possibly live for centuries. Then the ratio of gained years to present life span is, say, 150 years divided by 75 years, or a factor of 2. It could be higher, of course.

Then even if the probability of success is 1%, say, the probable yield from the investment of your time would be 2 x 1% = 2%. It would make sense to invest 2% of your time in this gamble. Then 2% of your lifetime earnings (a million dollars) would be at least $20,000, which you could use to pay your cryonics fees. Or you could choose to invest 2% of your time — half an hour a day — to working for cryonics. Make it a hobby. You would meet interesting people and might enjoy it. Most people spend more time than that in the bathroom.

Take another angle. Probability estimates should tell us the range of outcomes, not just an average number like 7%. To be a flagrant optimist, I could go back and take all the loosely technical issues to be much more probable, so that *TECH*=0.9, say. Then we get 29% probability.

This is just about the upper end of the plausible range, for me. I could be a gloomy pessimist, with equal justification, and take the social issues to be *SOC*=0.05, say. Then my

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original 7% estimate becomes less than one percent.

So the realm of plausible probabilities, to me, is between one percent and about 30%.

Low odds like one percent emerge because we consider many factors, each of which is fairly probable, but the remorseless act of multiplying them together yields a final low estimate. This is entirely natural to us. Studies show that most people of even temperament, considering chains of events, are invariably optimistic. We don't atomize issues, but look for obliging conditions. This seems to be built into us. We humans will always lose cash in crap games; it's a habit of the species.

I've dwelled on using this simple probability estimate to show some properties of the method. The deeper question is whether it truly makes sense to break up any future possibility into a set of mutually independent possibilities.

This comes powerfully into play in the *SOC* factors. Once the *TECH* issues look good, people will begin to change their minds about cryonics. The prospect of longer life may well make society more stable so *O* gets larger. Cryonics organizations will fare better, so *C* improves. The slicing up into factors assumes that the general fate of humankind is the same for the folk of the freezers, and this may not be so.

Cryonicists are a hard-nosed, practical lot, in my experience. They have many technical skills. Society might even crash badly, and they would keep their patients suspended through extraordinary effort. They have already done so. Police raided a cryonics company in the late 1980s (Alcor of Riverside, California — the same town where Heinlein put his cryonics firm in *The Door Into Summer)* and demanded that a recently frozen patient be handed over for autopsy. Someone spirited away and hid the patient until Alcor could get the police and district attorney off their back, but not before the police hauled five staff members off to jail and ransacked the facility.

Perhaps a better way to analyze this is to note that the biggest uncertainties lie in the intertwined *SOC* and *TECH* factors. A techno-optimist might say that cryonics will probably work on technical grounds, but social factors lessen the odds, maybe to the fifty-fifty range.

Of course, numbers don't tell the whole tale. When Ray Bradbury visited my campus (University of California at Irvine) last year to speak, a fan asked him how he felt about cryonics. I had introduced Ray as a forward-thinking, adventurous

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writer, perhaps the best known sf author in America, so I was rather surprised by his answer.

Ray said he was interested in any chance of seeing the future, but when he thought over cryonics, he realized that he would be torn away from everything he loved. What would the future be worth without his wife, his children, his friends? No, he wouldn't take the option at any price.

When he and I were talking later, I pointed out that he had come into this world without all those associations. And further, I asked, why did he assume that nobody else would go with him? He looked surprised for a moment, then answered that he doubted if any of his friends would want to go. So his argument still stood.

This is an example of the "neighborhood" argument, which says that mature people are so entwined with their surroundings, people and habits of mind, that to yank them out is a trauma worse than death. One is fond of one's own era, certainly. But it seems to me that ordinary immigrants often face similar challenges and manage to come through.

Still, if you truly feel this way, no arithmetic argument will dissuade you. For many, I suspect, the future isn't open to rational gambles, because it is too deeply embedded in emotional issues.

So it must be with any way of thinking quantitatively about our future. We cannot see the range of possibilities without imposing our own values and views, mired in our time, culture, and place.

Often, these are the things which we value most — our idiosyncratic angles on the world.

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Our cover story comes from Mike Conner. He returns to the universe of his Nebula-winning story, "Guide Dog," (May, 1991), and its popular sequel, "The Mystery Spot," (January, 1992). "East of the Moon" is a stand-alone novella which explores a whole new side of Conner's fascinating sf world. He says he plans to turn these stories into a novel someday.

In the meantime, Mike lives in California and plays harmonica for a rock band called the Naked Barbie Dolls.

East of the Moon

By Mike Conner

One

SO I WAS TRYING TO PRAY, and you know how that goes when you don't really believe in it. I felt like Jack felt when his mother threw the magic beans out the window. Embarrassed. Well, at least praying wasn't my idea. Audrey Pennebaker, the girl who was on her knees next to me, was the one who was trying to convert someone. We were both down there with our eyes closed trying real hard to pray. Finally we opened our eyes at the same time. I liked her eyes. They were almond-shaped, and pale green, with short bristles of lashes.

"You don't feel it, do you, GD," she said.

"I'm trying, Audrey. Honest."

She smiled kindly. "Oh, let's go for a walk."

"I don't mind trying again," I said.

"Later. Let's just take a little break for now."

Audrey knew her way around the *Stella*, and showed me the arcade, with

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its shops, restaurants, a post office, florist, game rooms and gym. We strolled down past decks D, E, and F, and reached the Promenade deck. There we went through frosted glass doors that opened as we approached into the core of the ship.

It was a tall space that was bathed with a wonderful, iridescent, blue-green light that seemed to come from everywhere. Big trees reached high toward the stacked rings of the upper decks, meeting thick ivy and liana that tumbled from ledges high above. Birds called, and flew between the branches of the trees and into the vines. There was a waterfall spreading a rainbow fan of droplets that brushed the deck rails with bands of color. At the very top, above the rock ledge, was a milky blue dome.

"Isn't she grand?" Audrey exclaimed.

"She's grand all right."

"She's the best ship I've ever been on."

"You've flown a lot?"

"Of course I have, silly! I've been traveling with Daddy ever since I was old enough to hold a tambourine."

We came up to a gate that had a sign warning passengers with electronic medical devices that the ship's field ran through the area ahead. Audrey went right through it.

"Isn't that dangerous?" I asked, hesitant to go in.

"Is what dangerous?"

"The field."

In answer, Audrey tipped her head back. "Mmmm," she said with her eyes closed. "*I* think it's nourishing."

Seeing her stretch her neck back like that made me want to get nourished myself. As soon as I followed her through the gate I felt the back of my neck tingle. Then, very strongly, a buzz. *The* buzz. I was picking up the Network full blast, just like at home around the Tree. I felt that burst of recognition, the change in the flavor of the signal that meant you were hooked in. I felt *surprise* too. Then all at once it stopped. It was like someone had closed a door on it.

"What's the matter?" Audrey said.

"I picked up the Network," I said.

"The Network?"

"Fliers."

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"But how can that be? We're light-years away from the Tree."

"Are there fliers on board?"

She shrugged. "I wouldn't think so."

"Why not?"

"They can't go to Tansis. Not yet, anyway. That's why the Revival stopped at Haven. Daddy was helping to arrange a meeting between the fliers and the Tanisian ambassador. Now he's headed back home with an offer to start peace negotiations."

I had learned a little about the war at the Academy. I knew there had been a clash between the Network and Tansis thirty years ago, and that the dispute between them had not been resolved since then, nor a peace treaty ever signed. I couldn't remember the cause of the war, or any of the details about the actual fighting.

"Do you really think it's the Network?"

What a question. I'd lived near the Tree all my life. I knew what the Network felt like. And it knew me, because I'd been a Guide Dog for Henry. He'd got away from me and died flying blind and I'd been blamed—convicted in their courts of murder. I knew what the Network felt like, all right.

"Whatever it was, it's gone now," I said. "Let's keep walking."

I sure liked walking with her. I liked the way she kept her shoulders back and level, letting her hips do the work as she moved. I liked the jingling sound her earrings made, and the way she sometimes had to skip an extra step to catch up with me. Along the arcade we stopped at the terrace and looked out at a café on the opposite side of the core. It was a dark space, lighted by red and blue lamps on the tabletops. The tables were crowded with people and you could see waiters moving in and out of the dark.

A steward came up. "Pardon me, Miss Pennebaker," he said. "I have a cylinder for you." And he held out a little tray with a dull gray plastic lozenge on it.

"Thank you," she said, taking it.

"What's that?"

"A flying cylinder. They're used to send messages aboard the ship. They put them into the field, so that they actually arrive *before* they're sent. So you can send notes to yourself to let you know what you're in for, that kind of thing. They're a lot of fun."

She unscrewed the top of the lozenge. Inside was a flat round button of

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shiny gold, and a rolled up note, which she carefully opened flat.

"This is so weird," she said. "Steward? Do you have a copy of the passenger list?"

"Yes, Miss Pennebaker." He gave her a blue-covered booklet. Audrey asked me to hold the cylinder and the message, and looked through it. Meanwhile, I read her message. "*Here is a copy of* East of the Moon," it said. "*You will find it a pleasure to read, because the author is on board.*"

"Here he is!" Audrey exclaimed.

"Who?"

"George Johnson." She pointed to the place on the passenger list: *Johnson, George. Journalist-Author.* "Oh, Daddy's going to have a fit!"

"Why?"

"First of all, that button is for a hand-book that Daddy's spent half his life trying to get banned. Everywhere we've ever gone, he's preached against this book. Why, he'd lock me up and throw the key away if he thought I'd even touched a copy!'

"Is it a bad book?" I asked.

"Only the worst kind of filth! Intellectual rape. That's how Daddy describes it. It gets into your head and mixes everything up."

"You've read it, then."

She was horrified. "I couldn't! Anyway, I don't have to. I know all about it from Daddy. It's about betraying everything you know to be good and right, except it pretends to be exactly the opposite. The hero is a monster all dressed up to look like someone you'd be proud to have for dinner."

"That's your Daddy talking," I said.

"I suppose you approve of pornography?"

"I like to see what it is, first."

"Take it then," she said, shoving the button into my hand. "Read it all you want. You won't get far. It'll make you sick!"

"Hey. Don't get sore."

She closed her eyes a moment, then opened them and touched my arm. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm just shocked, that's all. I don't know who would have sent such a thing to me, or why."

"Why don't you ask the steward where it came from?"

"I don't even want to know. And I don't want to be around when Daddy finds out George Johnson's on board."

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"Maybe they won't run into each other," I suggested.

"GD," Audrey said tolerantly. "We are going to be aboard this ship for a few days. There are only five hundred passengers. My father is not one of the shy ones, and from what I've heard, neither is George Johnson. Well! And here I thought Daddy would have a chance to relax and calm down, but I guess I was kidding myself, what with Mardi Gras and all."

"Mardi Gras?"

Audrey smiled mysteriously. "We haven't told you about that yet. What are you doing tonight? Do you have dinner plans?"

"They give you dinner?"

"Silly! What did you think? You come up to the first class dining room tonight at eight and ask for me. Do you have any dinner clothes? No, of course you don't. I'll have the steward take care of you." She started off, and suddenly stopped and turned back.

"GD?"

"Yes?"

"Take my advice and throw that book away?"

I said I would think about it, but I knew I wouldn't. I was too curious. And anyway, I told myself, what could a book do to you?

Two

I FELT RESTLESS after Audrey left and I wandered around the ship for a while. Eventually I hooked up with a tour group that was getting ready to leave the Promenade deck. Chief Officer Moore, a big, friendly man whose complexion was a deep, almost gun-metal blue, led us up along the ramps, stopping at various points to explain the features of the ship. I learned that the *Stella* had room for 700 passengers and 100 crew, although this jump wasn't completely booked; that there were six decks, stacked like rings inside the core of the donut-shaped hull; that she had made 737 crossings and had carried more than 340,000 passengers without a single accident; and that she was due for overhaul and refitting, and would return to the yards at Portsmouth, on Earth, after the stop on Tansis.

"You may have noticed," Chief Moore was saying, "that she's considerably bigger along the outer hull than what's accounted for with the decks and

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public areas. That's because most of the *Stella* is empty space. We're in the center, the hole of the donut, if you like. Around us is the part of the donut you'd eat. That's where the field generator that drives this ship is, suspended right in the middle of it. Flux lines from the field flow through the core, and out around the surface area of the hull. A star liner needs surface area. The more surface, the stronger the field, and the more passengers and cargo she can carry. You can have a cylinder, or even a box shaped hull, but a torus is most efficient. Come on, this way."

Moore led us to a service door in the ramp.

"Through this doorway we have access to the outer hull. Ordinarily it's sealed off during a crossing because there's very little that needs attending to in there. But we can have a look. I'd like to warn you though, there's a bit of hairy crossing between the hulls. And the air is very stale. It's the same air they blew her up with at Portsmouth, when they floated her out of the hangar seven years ago. Bad air, too. They don't waste the good stuff, inflating a hull!"

Chief Moore touched a key card to the door, which then opened with a faint hiss, and we came out onto a landing. Below us, a staircase zigzagged down into the space between the core and the inner hull of the ship. You could see emergency lights at each landing strung together like pearls tied off somewhere down in the darkness. Ahead of us, lit in blue, was a narrow gangway that led across to a second open hatch.

"Now. Who wants to go over?" Chief Moore said this with a big smile on his blue face. His teeth were blue, too. I said I'd give it a try.

"Anybody else?"

Three others said they'd come along too. Chief Moore gave me a flashlight, and said I should use it to get an idea of the spaciousness of the outer hull. The gangway wasn't hard to cross. It was narrow, and the handrails were awfully low, but it was sturdy enough. We went through the hatch onto a semi-circular landing. Moore was right. The air *did* stink. I pointed the beam of the flashlight into the dark and it spread across and fell faintly on the inside skin of the hull, casting intersecting shadows of the trusswork rings and spars that supported the skin when the ship was not in space. Guy wires ran from the spars down to catwalks that provided access to the deeply red, pulsing field generator that was suspended directly in the center of the outer hull. I noticed, as I pointed the beam up, that there were

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pod-shapes suspended in rows from the upper rings. As I was trying to make them out, we felt the platform rattle. You could see the shadows of the guy wires vibrating.

"Is this normal?" one of my companions asked nervously.

"It's probably the way the ship is all the time," I said. "But they dampen it in the core so we don't feel it."

"I don't know," the lady said. "Maybe we should report it."

"You really want to tell him?" I said. "Moore'd love it if we came out scared to death."

"It doesn't feel right, though."

"Well, maybe it doesn't. But if there *is* really something wrong with the ship, the crew doesn't need us to tell them. You heard what he said: they've made seven hundred crossings. They know what's what."

"You folks all right in there?" Moore called cheerfully from the gangway. "I don't have to come get you, do I?"

"You still want to tell him?" I asked the lady.

"No. I guess you're right."

We came out and rejoined the others, and Chief Moore took us up to the bridge.

"Now, Captain Pryzner isn't here at the moment. Part of his job's social, and there are several luncheons and teas he'll be attending this afternoon. Not to worry, though. Once we're underway and climbing toward midpoint, the *Stella* practically runs itself." There was a bank of workstations attended to by three of the bridge crew. Everybody was relaxed, and I exchanged a look with the woman who had gone into the outer hull with me. Moore went on to explain the purpose of some of the consoles, and described a typical crossing in terms of riding a bike up a steep hill, where you worked to reach the top — midpoint — and then coasted down. He took some questions, then passed out souvenir pins of the *Stella*, chits good for coffee or a "similarly priced beverage" at le Terrasse Café, and a fifteen percent off coupon for Mardi Gras costumes and accessories at the Shock Shop on the arcade level.

"Best of luck hooking up with a good Krewe," he said. "Hope to see you all at the Grande Bal on midpoint night!"

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I was tired after the tour and went back to my cabin for a nap. After a while the door bonged gently. It was the steward.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," he said, "but I see you're on the list for the Captain's table this evening. He's sent down a selection of suitable clothing with his compliments." He laid out a white jacket, striped stove-pipe trousers, and a gold shirt.

"These may need to be altered, so I'll take your measurements, if I may."

"What do I do?"

"Stand up straight, sir, and hold your arms out, so." I did, and he adjusted the angle of my arms slightly. "That's it, sir. One moment." He took a picture of me with a little camera. The clothing all had tags, which he inserted into the back of the device one by one, looking at a readout.

"I'll bring these back directly, sir," he said, gathering them up again.

"Thanks. Listen, is there really going to be a Mardi Gras?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"What is it, exactly?"

"It's something of a tradition, sir. You see, on this particular crossing we pass the galactic meridian. In the old times there were similar celebrations and ceremonies on Earth sailing vessels, when the equator was crossed."

"And we're supposed to dress up?"

"If you wish, sir. If you are recruited by one of the Krewes, then certainly. And if I may take the liberty of saying so, you being something of a celebrity on this voyage, you will certainly receive several bids from the Krewe chieftains."

"Who are they?"

The steward smiled mysteriously. "That is a secret, sir. The Krewes are secret societies. They exist independently of either ships or particular voyages. Some of them can trace their existence back three hundred years or more!"

"What kind of costumes are there?"

"All kinds, sir. If you wish, once you accept a bid, I would be more than happy to assist you in making appropriate selections."

"Okay. Sure. Thanks."

He told me again that he would return with the clothing well before six, and then left me alone.

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THREE

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK I went up to the main dining room on the A deck. It was big. There must have been a hundred tables in there, arranged around the milky lens I had seen earlier from the terrace lower down in the core. The curve of the lens rose about table height, and you could see over it to the other side of the room. Above it was a flat transparent disk that apparently provided a view of what was outside the ship. You could see star-tracks running over it like water drops, violet on one end, gradually changing to red on the other. I gave my name to the headwaiter, who checked a list and led me to a table close to the lens. At the table was Audrey.

"Oh, GD, you look wonderful!" she said, getting up to greet me. She was the one who looked wonderful, though. She wore an electric blue, off the shoulder gown that showed off her figure to full advantage. All of a sudden I felt bashful. Audrey noticed and looked dismayed.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I stammered. "It's just...seeing you...and me dressed like this. I've never...."

Audrey burst out laughing. "Well, you can console yourself with the fact that every man in this room feels the same way you do. They make those suits so that you *can't* be comfortable. That way you're off guard, and easy pickings!"

Every *man*? It sounded so old-fashioned and, well, *predatory*, that I was astonished. Audrey quickly touched my arm.

"GD, I'm joking!"

"I know," I said, but inside I knew that I *was* easy pickings.

"Come on to the table. Everybody's anxious to meet you!"

She took me by the arm and I realized what "Captain's table" meant. Captain Pryzner, a thin, tall man with an easy, youthful smile that I recognized from his pictures in the *Stella* brochures in my room, stood up to shake hands with me.

"Good to meet you," he said. "Audrey and her father were just telling us about your performance at the Revival."

"It wasn't exactly a performance," I said.

"Daddy, you remember GD."

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"Good to see you again, son."

Reverend Pennebaker was taller than the Captain and had a pale complexion, topped by a swirl of red hair that looked like a candle flame. His eyes bored in on me as he stood to shake hands. They weren't hostile, exactly, but they weren't friendly, either.

"And may I present Count Lattrey," Audrey said. "The Tanisian ambassador to the Network."

The Count was a small man who puffed somberly on a funny-smelling cigarette that gave off a burnt-umber smoke. He sighed, smoothed the front of his tunic, put his cigarette in an ashtray, and rose as smoothly and at the same speed as the smoke. He bowed to me. I bowed back. He then sat down and resumed smoking.

"Remember I told you about the negotiations, GD?" Audrey said. "The war between the Tree and Tansis is finally over."

"I do not wish to contradict you, Madame," the Count said. "However, we have merely agreed to *attempt* a peace conference."

"Well, sit down, GD. Are you hungry?"

"Sure," I said, but it was hard to think about food when Audrey was sitting next to me looking so good.

"Would you like some wine?" the Captain asked. "It's from the south part of France, I think. Have you ever been to France?"

"I've heard of it."

"You've never been home then."

"No."

"Ever get off the Tree at all?"

"Actually, Henry — he was my client — used to talk about our taking a trip together. But we never did."

"So zis is ze first crossing for you?" Count Lattrey said.

"Yes," I said, feeling more and more self-conscious.

"Zen I would like to invite you to join ze Proteus Krewe!"

"I'm sorry, Count, but I'm afraid he's already taken by King Neptune," Audrey said, grasping my arm.

"A bid!" Captain Pryzner said, raising his glass. It seemed to be some kind of toast, because everybody raised their glasses, and drank.

"Oh," Audrey laughed. "We're confusing him!"

Captain Pryzner said, "We have a tradition on star cruisers, GD. We have

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to drink when somebody accepts a Krewe bid."

"You do accept, don't you, son?" Reverend Pennebaker said.

"Well...I mean, what do I have to do? If I accept."

"Just say yes, and you'll see!" Audrey said.

"How about if I join?" someone who was not sitting at the table said.

Everyone fell silent. The man who had asked the question stood behind Audrey. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt with an open collar, and he had a thick white beard, and long, thinning hair, also white, that he combed straight back. His eyes were a watery, pale blue and his ruddy complexion and thick, heavily muscled arms looked as if they had been stained with berries.

"Why, hello, George," Captain Pryzner said. "I didn't think you went in for these things."

I felt a kick on my ankle, and looked at Audrey. She was wide-eyed. "It's George Johnson," she whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

"I'm just having a look around," Johnson said. "Wondering why I haven't got a bid from the King Neptune Krewe." He looked hard at Reverend Pennebaker.

"Now, Mr. Johnson," Reverend Pennebaker said with a steely smile fixed to his face. "You know very well that the King Neptune is a *Christian* Krewe."

"You saying I'm not a fucking Christian?"

Reverend Pennebaker's face turned as red as his hair. He jumped up and threw his napkin down on his plate.

"You can spew whatever filth you want in front of me. Your foulness is nothing new. But I will *not* endure your talking that way in front of my daughter."

"Daddy, it's all right — "

"It is *not* all right!"

"Okay, I apologize," Johnson said. "To your daughter."

Reverend Pennebaker seemed to spend a lot of energy controlling himself. He didn't speak until he had. Then, with icy calm, he said: "Captain, Count, I'm afraid I am unable to break bread with you. This table has been soiled. Come along, Audrey."

"But Daddy — "

"I said come along!"

"Yes, sir," she said quietly, lowering her eyes. "I'll call you later," she

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whispered to me. Then she and her father quickly left the room.

"Hell with them," Johnson said. He wasted no time, but sat down in the chair Reverend Pennebaker had vacated. "He's a phony bastard through and through. Always has been. And his Revival's a racket!"

"He has been quite useful in ze negotiations wis ze Network," the Count observed.

"Him being a bug-lover doesn't get him any slack with me." Johnson tore off a piece of bread, ate it, and suddenly turned to me.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

"This is GD," Captain Pryzner said. "GD, meet George Johnson."

"How you doing, kid," he said, showing worn-down, yellowed teeth.

"GD used to work as a Guide Dog in the Tree."

"That a fact? So you're a bug-lover too."

"Actually, they're not awfully fond of me at the moment."

"Well, fuck 'em," Johnson growled. "Fuck 'em *all!*"

"George, lighten up," Pryzner said. "Here comes the waiter. Why don't you order some food?"

"Maybe I'd better look at the menu," I said.

Johnson said, "You don't need a menu. They've got fresh oysters. You like oysters?" Without waiting for my answer, he signaled the waiter. "Bring us each a plate of Kumumotos. And then we'll have the cracked crab and the spinach salad. Make sure you put plenty of garlic in the dressing. Oh, and bring us two bottles of that Tavel."

"We're not sure the boy drinks, George," Captain Pryzner said.

"If he lived with bugs, he drank all right. They make that honey-mead, you know. The bugs can really put it away. Nobody's a roundhead on that planet!"

"Ze Reverend would certainly be out of business if they were," the Count said.

"Jim Pennebaker'll be the last son of a bitch to go out of business," Johnson said sullenly. "Him and the fucking cockroaches." Once again he turned toward me, squinting his eyes. Then: "Say! Aren't you the kid who worked for that painter?"

"That's right."

"Hell of a thing, for a bug to paint!"

"Why wouldn't they paint?" I said.

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"Obviously they do," Captain Pryzner said. "I've got a reproduction of his hanging in my study at home."

"Which one?" I said.

"It's called *The Porch #7*. It's all misty and blue. Do you know it?"

"No. But he painted an awful lot of pictures."

"And a lot of awful ones!" Johnson said.

The waiter returned with the wine, and a platter of shelled oysters. I'd only seen them in pictures before, since there weren't anything like them in the oceans on the fliers' world. These were a shiny, iridescent gray lying on their shells, and they appeared to be moving slightly along their curly edges. Johnson squeezed lemon on his, and topped each one with a sprinkling of chopped onion. Then he picked up the shell, tipping his head back, and let the oyster slide down his throat. I tried one. They were pretty good, if you didn't think too much about what you were swallowing.

After that, the platters of crab and the salads arrived. Captain Pryzner showed me how to crack the shells of the crab and extract the meat with a fork. It was a little unnerving eating crab, because they were built a lot like the fliers, but they were delicious. I got around to trying another oyster, too. Meanwhile, the food and wine seemed to mellow Johnson a little. After a while, he apologized to everyone for his behavior.

"It's this star travel. It really puts a strain on you."

"Oh, George," Captain Pryzner said.

"What? Am I wrong? Take a look at the Captain, kid. How old would you say he is?"

"I don't know how old people are," I said.

"Come on, take a guess. Mike, turn your head for the kid. Show off your gray hairs."

"Forty? Forty-five?"

"He's twenty-six," Johnson said.

"Twenty-five, actually," the Captain said.

"I'm sorry!" I said, feeling my face turning red.

"Hey, you were being charitable. Mike, tell him how old the oldest ship's captain in active service with your line is."

"We have a mandatory retirement age of thirty-two," Pryzner replied.

"And you started your training when you were how old?"

"Twelve."

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"How old when you mastered your first jump?"

"Nineteen years, three months."

"Eight years of training for twelve years of service. That's not much of a career."

"When you consider the number of Captain's dinners we sit through, it is a *long* career," Pryzner said.

We all laughed at the joke; and he went on. "It's true that a jump takes a toll on certain people. We don't hide that. The fields that power this ship are extremely powerful, and can affect people in different ways. That doesn't necessarily mean there's anything harmful about star-crossing *per se*. But the mandatory retirement age is a precaution the company feels it must take."

"It uses you up, Mike. Admit it."

"Okay. I'm completely used up."

"Of course, it's not just the Captain, either. The passengers take a beating, too. Sometimes the field locks up with them and they panic. That's when you get a storm."

Pryzner put down his wine glass. "George, I don't think you ought to be talking like that."

"Come on, Mike! What about the *Morning Glory*?"

"There was never any proof of a storm," Pryzner replied stiffly.

"No proof! There was salvage. I saw it!" He turned to me. "I had a friend of mine, Harvey Dent, who was in the insurance business on Tansis. He showed it to me."

"Here it comes," Captain Pryzner said, but Johnson ignored him.

"See, Dent was having trouble with his wife. She'd thrown him out, so he was living in his office. I'd run into him at the café downstairs. One day he asks me to sit down and have a drink. He's been down there a while. There's a big pile of saucers in front of him.

"'George,' he says. 'How'd you like a cat?'

"Now, a cat's a rare item on Tansis. The Tanisians are nuts about 'em. They'll pay any amount of money for one. Harvey had bought his wife a cat when things were going good, and he'd been paying it off on time ever since.

"'Why the hell should I keep paying when she hates my guts,' Dent says. 'Take the cat, George.'

"I tell him I didn't want a cat. I'm out most of the time. Who would feed it? Who would take it out to shit?

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"'You don't have to take them out. They shit in a box,' Harvey said.

"Well, I still didn't want to take the cat, but he was adamant. Finally he tells me that if I just have a look at it, he'll show me something else I might be very interested in. I don't really think Harvey's got anything, but I'm tired of him whining. So we go upstairs.

"His office is a disaster area. He's got his clothes up there, boxes of dishes, household goods. There's so much of it he can't find the cat right away. Eventually we do find it sleeping in his bottom desk drawer. It's an orange cat with long fur and short ears and a face like an owl. Ugliest damn thing I've ever seen.

"'I don't want that cat, Harvey,' I tell him. 'It's too fucking ugly.'

"He tells me he'll give me a story if I take the cat. That's when he showed me the salvage. He pulls out his desk chair and turns on the lamp, opens a metal box and tells me to have a look. Inside, there's some personal items. A watch. A baby shoe. A few pieces of metal and a saucer with the *Morning Glory* pattern. And this journal. A handwritten journal of a girl who had been traveling to Tansis to spend the summer with her big sister. He shoves a pad at me and tells me to take notes. So I did. In the journal was the story of what happened aboard the *Morning Glory*. How the passengers all went crazy, and disrupted the field, and tore the ship apart.

"Now, the good Captain here will insist, as soon as I finish, that nothing was ever officially recovered from the *Morning Glory*. But he knows the truth. The whole thing was a lousy cover-up!"

"You were a journalist back then," Captain Pryzner said. "Why didn't you file a story?"

"I did file one. InterNet killed it."

"Oh, crap, George. That all happened in your *novel*."

"You calling me a liar, Mike?"

"I'm calling you a *story-teller*, George. And a damned irresponsible one at the moment."

"What do you mean, irresponsible?"

"You may as well stand up on this table and yell fire, it's the same damned thing!"

Now Count Lattrey, who had been smoking impassively the whole time, spoke up. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and grimaced, showing his ochre-stained teeth.

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"Perhaps it is not Mr. Johnson's fault," he said. "Perhaps he cannot help himself."

Johnson turned to the Count.

"What did you say?"

Lattrey put the cigarette out. "Some say ze story of *East of the Moon* did not originate wis ze author."

Instantly, all color drained from Johnson's face. He got up slowly, and came around the table to stand over the Count.

"You lousy bastard. You have a hell of a nerve saying that to me."

"I only repeat ze fact which everybody knows quite well. Your novel is propaganda, written under ze influenz of ze Network."

Johnson smiled grimly. "You know I've always wanted some Tanisian son of a bitch to say that to my face. Stand up."

"Very well."

The Count stood. He barely came up to Johnson's chest. He was one of those fragile-looking old guys too. You had the feeling that if Johnson did hit him, the Count would shatter into a billion brown little pieces.

"Take it back," Johnson growled.

"Why should I take back ze truth?"

Johnson gritted his teeth and stepped toward the Count; I jumped up and got between them.

"Out of the way, kid."

"I won't let you hit him," I said.

Johnson didn't waste any time arguing with me. With him it was one warning and I'd had it. He lowered his shoulder, feinted with his left. I ducked from the punch that wasn't coming, right into a right hand that did.

It was weird. I didn't really feel the blow. Instead I got this overwhelming yen to sit down on the floor. I did, and it kind of jarred my neck and the back of my head, and then I watched the Captain tell Johnson he'd throw him in the brig if he didn't leave, and Johnson looking red-faced and furious stalking off and the Count sitting down calmly and lighting another ochre cigarette. Some time later somebody helped me up. I heard myself saying I was okay, and they let me finish my oysters, but everything was strange for a long time after that.

Eventually, they took me back to my cabin.

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Four

BACK IN my cabin I discovered that my bed had been turned down. On the night stand next to the bed was a bucket of ice and an ice bag, a pitcher of mineral water, a glass, a foil-wrapped chocolate mint and a hand-book reader. All compliments of the *Stella.* I looked at these things for a long time. Then I shed my stiff dinner clothes, pulled the tub out of the wall, and drew a bath.

In the hot water I thought of Audrey. I pictured her in that blue dress at dinner. I was certain that things would not have gotten out of hand if she had stayed. I thought of how pleasant that would have been in contrast to the punch I had taken. Then the water cooled off and I got out of the tub and dried off. I got out the gold button Audrey had given me, and opened the reader. Inside the inner flap were several buttons. I took one out and squeezed it a little and it seemed to open up in my fingers into a sandy desert with a bright star twinkling in a deep blue evening sky. The title, *Authorized New Testament,* blazed above the star. I put that disk back, filled the ice bag, loaded *East of the Moon* into the drive, put the ice bag on my forehead and settled back into my pillows.

About the Author

George Johnson was born in St. Anthony, Minnesota in 2—. When he was six, his parents were killed in a boating accident, and he and his sister were sent to live with their aunt, Claudette Johnson-Morris, the celebrated midwest poet. Unhappy with the "atmosphere of phony antique culture," as he put it later, Johnson ran away from home at twelve, became a stowaway on cargo liners, first on the oceans of Earth, and then in the star lanes. During this period he kept a journal describing his nomadic existence, eventually published as "Letters from an Involuntary Exile," by the Scripps syndicate. These journals brought him notoriety because of their intense romanticism, violence, and the determination to persevere "against any lousy odds." In spite of his growing fame, Johnson refused to settle on a literary career, continuing to work as a cargoman and later, as a semi-professional boxer. Eventually Scripps persuaded him to cover the Network

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War on Tansis, and he remained there as a stringer. His experiences of life in Tansis in the aftermath of the war forms the basis for East of the Moon, *his only work of fiction.*

There was a grinning picture of Johnson floating up ahead of me, his hair salt and pepper gray instead of white. The picture then drew back slowly at first, and then rapidly, so that you felt it in your stomach like a fall. Then there was noise, a lot of clattering, rushing noise, and there I was standing in a street full of noisy traffic. There was no doubt about it. I closed the hand-book and the street went away. I opened it again and I watched cars and trucks go by through a swirling haze of red dust. The vehicles were all narrow, boxy, and top-heavy. Then that view pulled back and around, the traffic noise became part of the background, and I turned and came upon a young man sitting at a table on the terrace of a café.

The man wore a black jacket, a black shirt with a round collar, and a relaxed grin. He looked like George Johnson.

"Welcome to Tansis," the man began. "We're on the Boulevard Pelanq, and it's late summer. We're at the end of the long annual drought that dries the whole country and turns the soil to red dust that sifts onto the town and powders everything a nice rusty color. My name's Matthew Bradey. I'm stringer for the Tansis office of the Scripps syndicate.

"It's my job to keep an eye on our people over here. There's a lot of tourists, and it keeps me pretty busy. I watch them, or talk to people who do, and then I write it up. All the political stuff, of course, plus the sporting news, and especially the gossip—or, at least, the stuff I can get away with repeating. People back home are dying to hear what the expatriates are up to. That's what they tell me in the office, anyway."

Bradey took a sip from his glass. "I've lived here, on and off, since the last year of the war. But we won't talk about that. Why don't you sit down? I'll order you something to get your juices going. First time here?"

"Yes." I hesitated.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, am I supposed to talk to you in this thing?"

"Why not? I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"Sure you are."

"Let me give you some advice. When you're here, just go with it. Don't try to fight Tansis, because Tansis always wins. They don't call this place the

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City of Lost Souls for nothing."

"How do you mean, lost?" I said.

"I could try to explain it," Bradey said. "But maybe you'd better take things from my angle for a while. That way, you'll get a better idea."

"From your angle?"

"Yeah. Be me for a while. Here, I'll show you." And all at once I felt myself being pulled toward him and around, and it was *me* sitting at the table all by myself. I was nursing my drink, because I had decided it was company. A drink makes good company sometimes. This company was amber-green and tasted of anise, and trickled down to my stomach in a funny way. Well, it was a funny kind of company, too. I was pleasantly drunk and looked out across the Boulevard and saw someone walking toward me with great determination. He was a tall, fiercely earnest young man with long red hair and glasses. Nobody wore glasses anymore except Jacob Kahane. He wore glasses to show he knew about them, and that he had worn his eyes out from working.

"Hello, Matt," he said. "You look comfortable."

"They have good chairs at this place," I said. "Everybody comes to try them out." I pushed one out with my foot. "Take a load off."

"I don't know, Matt. Lately I can't seem to sit still at all." But he sat down anyway and began chewing nervously on the cuticle on his ring finger. I batted his hand away from his mouth.

"Don't do that."

"I can't help it."

"Don't. Tell me how the book's coming along."

"Rotten, Matt. I haven't been able to figure it out yet at all."

"It'll come," I said philosophically.

"I suppose so," he said without enthusiasm. Then: "Listen. What do you know about the Barrens?"

"I've never been there, if that's what you mean."

"Well, I want to go. How about taking a trip there with me?"

"What for?"

"It's so damn hot here. I don't see how anybody gets a thing done in this town. How were they ever able to build the place?"

"Maybe they waited for the weather to break," I suggested.

"Well, I can't wait anymore. I want to take a heliplane down south. I'd

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stake your expenses if you came along."

"Nix," I said. "I'd miss my favorite time of the year."

"It's jungle there," he said, going on as though he hadn't heard me turn him down. "A man knows what he's facing. He has to do certain things, and he knows perfectly well what they are, and what will happen to him if he doesn't do them. There isn't any guessing. There isn't anyone expecting him to do things he doesn't want to do. There aren't any scenes when you don't do them, either."

"You're right. When a tree jackal comes down on you from behind, there isn't a scene. He merely rips your head off."

"I'd rather have my head ripped off," Kahane said glumly, "than to go through what I do every night. I can't sleep, Matt. I can't sleep, and I can't sit still. I — "

The door chime startled me.

The hand-book flipped off my lap and closed. It was hard to believe I was lying on a bed, but there I was, with the sound of all that traffic on the boulevard still tingling in my ears. The lights were down in my cabin and I saw someone silhouetted in my open doorway. He stood with his legs spread, as though he were bracing himself. He wasn't doing a very good job, though. He weaved, and then took two shaky steps inside.

"There you are," he said. "Fucking steward said D deck."

It was George Johnson. I sat up. The ice bag slid off my head and onto my stomach. Johnson came in and sat heavily in the chair next to the bed. A quizzical expression spread over his face. He reached across the bed and picked up the hand-book.

"What're you reading?"

"Have a look," I said.

He opened it. His face went blank for a moment, and then he snapped it shut. "Ouch," he said with a wince. "Holy Christ, that hurts."

"What do you mean, 'it hurts'?"

"Not a good idea to read your own stuff, kid. Can't look good to you. Can only look like hell." He screwed up his face again. "Where'd you get it, anyway?"

"Somebody sent it to Audrey Pennebaker. She didn't want it, so she gave it to me."

"That isn't all she wants to give you," he said, tossing the hand-book

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onto the floor.

"I suppose I should try to slug you for saying that. But I'm still recovering from the last time."

"I'm sorry, kid. You're right." He stood up unsteadily. "I owe you. Here. Take a shot. Hit me."

I was tempted. He hadn't done much to endear himself to me since we'd met. But then again, I had never been much of a fighter.

"Come on, you bastard, lay me out!"

"George," I said. "I'm not going to hit you. Why don't you sit down and talk to me instead."

He blinked his eyes and sat down again looking confused and meek all of a sudden.

"What do you want me to talk about?"

"Why'd you get so angry at the Count?"

Johnson groaned. "I wish to Christ you'd just hit me."

"Tell me."

He chewed on his beard a moment.

"Okay," he said. "That book's the only one I ever wrote. Made me a fortune. It was a smash. A fucking sensation. For a while everybody was reading it. The boys were all dressing in black like Matt. The girls wore their hair clipped slanted like Chase Kendall. You got to her yet?"

"Not yet."

"You'll see what I mean. But it pissed off the powers that be on Tansis. Fuckers pulled my visa. I had to get the hell out and go back to Earth for a while. I figured, what the hell, I'd live in Minnesota and start working again. But it wouldn't come there. I didn't worry. I just went someplace else and tried again. Nothing. By then I'd started to get spooked, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. No matter where I went or what I tried, I couldn't get another book started.

"Then after a few years, I realized that it was Tansis. Tansis was my real home, kid, the only place I could really work. I kept applying to go back, but they wouldn't let me in. Said my book was enemy propaganda. That it aided and abetted the enemy.

"Hell, who can blame 'em. When the bugs came in, they didn't do any of the fighting. They took *people* over and made them fight each other. That way it didn't matter who won a battle. Tanisians got killed either way.

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Anyway, line on me was, *I'd* been taken over too, and that I'd written the novel for the Network. They had a witch-hunt, and I got caught, but it was all to divert attention from the fact that their government's lousy with people who *were* taken over by the bugs. It sucks. It's been a long time, kid, and I've been taking it for years. But I wasn't going to take it from that lousy Count tonight."

"Why are they letting you back in now?"

"Who knows? Maybe they figure they can make money off me. Stick me in an alcove in the Roole Museum."

"So what are you going to do when you get back?" I said. "You going to try to write again?"

Slowly, Johnson got up. "Right now, I'm going to bed." He looked down at the hand-book reader on the floor.

"You like the book, though?"

"Sure I do."

"Oh, fuck you," he said softly, his voice slurred. The door opened and he ambled off into the corridor. A little while later I finally fell asleep.

Five

THE NEXT morning the steward came with a note from Count Lattrey. Would I meet him in an hour in the game room along the arcade? I scribbled a reply on the steward's tablet that I would, asked the steward to return it to him, then went up to the gym for a workout. I had a good run and tried a few moves on the rings and the high bar, but my neck and the right side of my face were still sore from Johnson's hitting me, so I knocked off, took a long hot shower, shaved, and went across the arcade to meet the Count.

He was waiting for me, sitting perched on a high stool along the paneled wall, with his heels hooked against the top rung of the stool. He got off it when I came in and shook hands gravely with me.

"Sank you for coming," he said.

"Not at all, Count."

"I sought, perhaps, you would not agree to come, after ze unpleasantness of last evening. You were not injured, I trust?"

"Not seriously."

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The Count nodded. "I inquired, of course. But it is good to see you are only a little stiff. Good." The Count went to a stand where a bottle was on ice, the neck wrapped in a towel.

"I have taken ze liberty of ordering wine. Do you enjoy champagne?"

"I don't think I've ever had it, Count."

"You will find it a good wine," he said, pouring out a narrow glass for me. The wine was pale yellow, and full of rising bubbles. "I find it pleasant to drink a glass of wine as I play."

I tasted it. He was right. It *was* pleasant. The Count racked the balls on the table into a diamond shape.

"Do you know ze game of nine-ball?"

"I haven't played for a while," I said. "But I think I remember the rules."

"Good," the Count said. "Zince you have not played, will you allow me to give you a handicap of, shall we say, fifteen balls?"

"Certainly, Count," I said.

We lagged for the break, I won, and broke the rack without sinking anything. Then the Count went to work, walking quickly around the table as he sank one ball after another. Finally he paused for a drink of wine.

"Ze voyage. Has it been agreeable for you so far?"

"Mainly," I said.

The Count grimaced, showing his stained teeth. He missed a shot to the side pocket. Purposefully, I thought. I lined up my first shot and dropped the three ball in the corner pocket.

"My complimentz," the Count said. "Did you not find it difficult leaving your homeland?"

"Well, I didn't have much of a choice." I missed my second shot and the Count walked the table again.

"It is true zat technically, you are an escaped felon," he said. "However, under ze circumstances I do not imagine it would be difficult for you to obtain political asylum on Tansis. If you zo wish, I will do what I can to speed your application through ze various bureaus."

I didn't say anything. He hit a slow shot, and the seven ball dropped heavily into the side pocket.

"Is somezing wrong?"

"Please don't think I don't appreciate the offer, Count. But why would you do that?"

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"I believe we must have solidarity among zose who have been victimized by ze Network."

"What makes you think I've been a victim?"

The Count only smiled as the balls cracked again. He was hitting each shot now to set himself up for the next. Finally there was only the nine-ball left. He lined his shot up carefully, but suddenly the *Stella* listed hard to port, and two balls rolled down and rested against the cushion. The Count waited as the ship gradually righted itself.

"What was that?" I asked, alarmed.

"Occasionally zare is turbulenz during a crossing. Shall we re-rack and try again?"

"You were about to win, Count."

"It dozzent matter." He arranged the balls, lighted one of the ochre cigarettes, and looked at me. "*Do* you oppose ze Network?"

"I don't know anything about politics. But I guess it's no good for them to be invading other words."

"You misunderstand me. I am not speaking of war. Do you oppose ze Network as it is? Do you oppose fliers as beings?"

"Well. I respect them. They're intelligent, capable, powerful. All the things we like to think we are."

"And do you sink zey return zis respect to us?"

"I'm not sure about that."

"But you lived wis zem."

"Yes. And I was very close to a few, but I was never really sure whether any of them respected me or not. They're real arrogant. I think they only see themselves. I mean, they're all linked together, and I think it's just kind of self-contained."

"You were close to ze painter," the Count said, leaning on his cue. "Did you ever feel you were part of ze Network, through him?"

"Sometimes," I said. The interrogation was starting to make me uncomfortable.

"And have you ever felt contact wis ze Network alone? When you were not wis your former employer?"

"I felt it yesterday," I said.

"Interesting," the Count said, smoking. "Can you describe ze experienze?"

"It was only a moment or two. I was in the palm court with Audrey

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Pennebaker. I guess the ship's field runs through there, and I had a reaction to it. I felt the Network recognizing me, like I would if I was linking in with them in the Tree. You go in, hello, I'm here, and it says, yes, we know you're out there, and then you're linked."

"Strong or weak?"

"It was strong. But like I said, it was only for a second, and then it cut off. So maybe I was just reacting to the field and having some kind of flashback."

"You don't, perhaps, sink zare are fliers aboard zis ship?"

"Count. What's with all these questions?"

"Forgive me," the Count said with a grimace, showing off his ochre stained teeth. "But we are zumwhat...concerned about your presence on zis ship."

"Concerned how?"

"As you admit, you were very close to zem. It is possible that you are under ze influence. And yesterday evening, Mr. Johnson, who is a well-known Network sympathizer, visited you very late in your cabin."

"You're spying on me!" I was astonished.

"I make it my business to know what occurs aboard zis ship."

"Well, maybe you know he came to apologize for slugging me," I said angrily. "And you must know he's no Network sympathizer. He hates fliers!"

Lattrey said, "On Tansis, we say zare is such a sing as putting too much paint on ze brush."

"Well, it's obvious, if you read his book — "

Now it was the Count's turn to look astonished. "You have read ze novel?"

"I'm reading it now."

Lattrey's voice turned cold. "May I ask where you obtained a copy?"

"No, you may not."

Slowly, the Count re-racked the balls. He chalked his cue and then began sinking shots one after another, until he had cleared the table. When he was through, he poured himself another glass of wine, drank it slowly, and filled his glass again.

"You are quite right to refuse. Forgive me. But allow me to give you zum advize. Do not attempt to bring ze hand-book through customs. You will be

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arrested. Ze book is suppressed on Tansis. I would not be able to help you."

"We're not on Tansis yet," I said.

"Quite zo."

"Why is the book suppressed, Count?"

"Ze hero of ze novel is a man who has been captured and controlled by ze Network. He was made to fight against ze forces of lawful authority. Zis situation did in fact occur. Many, many units of ze government forces were turned against one anozzer. Once ze war was over you can imagine how painful it was for zose who suffered zis outrage to realize zey had raised arms against brozzer, against sizzter. Worse was zat no one could be trusted. Fortunately it was ze policy of our government to grant amnesty to all who came forward, and submitted to treatment."

"What kind of treatment?"

"It is a kind of stimulation of ze brain, which has both psychological and religious aspects. It is a cleansing and purging effect."

"Like a brainwash with a side of exorcism," I said.

"However you put it, a person who has been treated can never be used by ze Network again. In ze novel, ze hero resists completing his treatment. He still suffers from ze effects of ze Network, but hides zis from ozzers, and from himself. He is proud of himself for so doing. Ze reader feels sympathy for his position. Zat is reason enough for ze book to be suppressed."

"But what I've read so far, the hero's just trying to uncover the truth about the ship that broke up."

"Ze novel was produced by ze Network," the Count said flatly. "Mr. Johnson was under ze control of ze Network during ze war. He did not submit to treatment. It is possible he may try to sabotage ze ship in order to destroy ze peace. He is not to be trusted under any circumstances!"

"If he's not to be trusted, why is your government letting him in again?"

"Zat is not my wish. But I ask you, as someone who knows ze power of ze fliers, to consider what happens to you when you are in ze book. You sink you are entertaining yourself, but you leave ze Network free to create fear and doubt in your mind, which has been opened wide by ze beautiful descriptions of ze city and ze powerful love ze hero has for ze girl. For us, zare is no doubt. Zis book is poison. My advice to you is to destroy it!"

It did not seem like poison to me, but then again, I wasn't Tanisian. Maybe it *was* poison. Then again, I didn't think that turning away from ideas,

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even bad ones, was the best way to protect yourself from them.

"Count," I said. "Maybe we should lay off books and politics."

He bowed. "I have said all I wish to say. You are a colonist. Ze Colonial insists zat exile from ze homeland is ze price of freedom. Whezzer one becomes truly free under ze conditions of exile is anozzer matter. Perhaps you should ask Mr. Johnson about it."

He poured the rest of the wine from the bottle into his glass. He did not offer me any. He had seen that I had only sipped mine. He asked whether I would like to play another game. However, the *Stella* was rolling pretty steadily in a slow ploughing motion that rearranged the balls on the table after practically every shot, so that finally we had to give up. I shook hands with him, said that I would think about everything he said. He had the good manners not to ask me about *East of the Moon* again.

Six

I DIDN'T WANT to admit it to myself, but when I left the Count in the game room I was worried. Maybe it *was* possible the Network could control someone without them knowing it. I mean, I'd always kind of resented Henry because of the way he'd nudge me to do what he wanted by rewarding me with that wave of emotion I craved so much. But that was overt. Who knew what else they could really do to you? Maybe they could lock themselves deep into some part of the brain that you never even used yourself. Or maybe they could only do it to the Tanisians. They were natural empaths, after all. Maybe they were more susceptible than we were.

But Johnson was worried about it too. Otherwise why would he have gotten so angry at the Count? I thought that maybe there was something in the novel that would make me understand the whole thing better. I decided to have another look at the hand-book, and went back to my cabin. I opened the book, and the city burst into life around me. I was back with Bradey again, at his favorite café on the Boulevard Pelanq.

"So there you are," Bradey said. "I was wondering when you'd be back."

"George Johnson said I should get to the part about the girl," I said.

Bradey frowned. "Kid. You should know better than that. You can't talk about Johnson here."

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"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to hear about him. You want to meet the girl, just ask, but don't talk to me about Johnson. He doesn't belong here, *capisce?*"

"Sorry," I said resentfully.

He smiled. "Don't worry about it, kid. Now, where were we?"

"The girl," I said.

"Okay. The girl." He stubbed out his cigarette and sat back. "I met her after I stole that journal from Harvey Dent's office. Harvey was such a fucking mess. I knew his company wasn't going to trust him much longer. So, I stole the journal and had a copy made and then broke into Harvey's office and put the copy back with the other stuff. I kept the original.

"After that I did a little checking. There was one thirteen-year-old girl who was on the passenger list. Beth Kendall was her name. I did a little more checking and found out that there was a Chase Kendall living up on the Mont. I took the journal with me and went up there to pay a call."

It was getting dark. They had turned on the strings of lights that ran below the dusty trees on either side of the avenue.

"Look," Bradey said. "It's hard for me to explain this third-hand. How about taking a walk alone?"

"Okay."

As soon as I agreed the street faded. Suddenly I was at the foot of the Mont. It was a bluff that overlooked the city from the east. There were limestone cliffs with warrens that had been dug out in medieval times and were still occupied by the indigent who were strong and nimble enough to climb down the chain ladders the city had installed when the Progressive Horde had held power at the end of the last century. The chains were rusted now, and occasionally a ladder gave way. The present government, dedicated to "work, freedom, and family," was not in the business of chain ladder repair for the benefit of the indigent. That was nothing new. Whenever you had a government which was fond of that particular slogan, you discovered it provided no jobs, wanted to deprive you of your freedom, and that the only families who were making out at all were the relatives of the ruling circle.

Anyway, I took the funicular from the platform alongside the quay, got off and followed a narrow street that switched back and forth along the face of the bluff, and found the address. Chase Kendall lived in a studio at the top of a sixth-floor walkup. I was very hot from the walk, and halfway up I stopped

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and put my head out the arched window of the landing and hoped for a breeze. But there wasn't any; only dull-bronze, shimmering heat that reflected up from the metalled rooftops below. I mopped my face with my handkerchief, walked up the rest of the way, and pulled the bell.

"Yes?" came from behind the door.

"Miss Kendall?"

A moment's silence. "That's right."

"Did you have a sister named Beth?"

Nothing.

"My name's Bradey, Miss Kendall. I'm a reporter. I've come across something that may have belonged to her. A diary. I was hoping you'd take a look at it and tell me whether it's authentic or not."

After a long moment, the door swung open. It was dark and cool inside. It took me a few seconds to make out what was in front of me: windows covered with heavy drapes, a fireplace with a chaise and a couple of chairs arranged around it, and steep stairs leading up to a loft.

"Please come up," came a soft voice that was dark and cool as the room.

I climbed the stairs. There were candles burning, a single work light clamped to a ceiling beam training its narrow beam on an empty easel, and Chase Kendall, dressed in gray silk pajamas with a tunic collar and blue metal buttons. Her silver hair was brushed to one side and cut off at a slant that extended from the nape of her neck to the line of her jaw. Her hair had been brushed smooth. It was pewter colored, and smooth as that metal.

"Please stand in the light, Mr. Bradey."

I took a step back and let her look at me. She had something in her right hand. A cap-derringer. What the Tanisians preferred for close-in defense, and it was cocked. I eyed it, and after a moment she released the hammer, and slipped it into the pocket of her gown.

"I live alone," she said. "You know how it is."

"Sure. I keep a brace of hounds myself."

She smiled. "Would you like some tea?"

"Thanks."

Chase pulled out a chair. I sat in it, watching her all the time as she put ice into a glass and poured out tea from a pitcher. She handed me the glass and sat down on a stool.

"Were you close to Beth?" I asked.

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She shrugged. "She was my kid sister. My parents sent her here every summer."

"What for?"

"They said it was to broaden her, Mr. Bradey."

"And what did you do to broaden her?"

She lighted one of the brown Tanisian cigarettes. "I painted. Nights when it cooled off I took her around town. Sometimes we'd go south to the coast. I've got a cottage in Nully."

"Any pictures of her around?"

She considered the question a moment. Then she got up and switched on another lamp, and a beam of light fell on the portrait of a young girl. She had brown hair, and a rounder face than Chase's, but the even, cool expression in her eyes was just the same.

"She's very pretty."

She switched off the light and sat down again. "Why don't you show me what you brought?"

I took the journal out of my pocket and gave it to her. She ran a finger across its red foil cover. Then she opened it, turning one page, then another. I couldn't tell if she was having a reaction or not. All I knew was that, as her cool eyes moved across the pages of the journal, something was turning over inside of me. Is there a moment when you actually fall in love? I don't know. Maybe it happened when she looked up, with the book still open.

"The handwriting's like hers. But I suppose people sound different when they're writing. Do you think you could read a little of it out loud?"

She gave me the book.

"All right." And I started reading. *"They killed Captain Harris today."* I stopped and looked at her then, to see how she was taking it.

"Please go on."

"We have been shaking so badly all night that nobody can sleep at all. The passengers just wander around, drunk or drugged or frightened. A lot of them are still dressed up for Mardi Gras. Sometimes you see gangs of them running together. I heard from Paulie, the assistant steward, that all of the shops were broken into and looted. He told me I should stay in my cabin until things quieted down but there's something wrong with the air system and I felt like I was going to suffocate, so I went out.

"I walked down to the Promenade deck. There's a horrible noise going

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all the time. The ship creaks and snaps and crashes. Down on the deck was a big commotion. Passengers rushing toward the main salon. I asked somebody what was going on and he said they were putting Captain Harris on trial for refusing to turn back so that the ship could get out of the storm.

"I followed everybody into the main salon. It was packed and I squeezed in and stood on a table in the back. They had Captain Harris in a chair. She looked green and ill. People screamed questions at her. Why was the turbulence so bad? Why hadn't she sent back a cylinder to warn herself? Sometimes she tried to answer but they just howled back at her. It was horrible!

"Then all of a sudden the ship gave a big lurch and everybody was thrown down and was kind of shocked when it was over and that's when the Captain slowly got up. She had such a terrible expression on her face. They had taken her hat away and her hair was coming undone. Some of the pins were sticking out of it. She started to talk. She said: 'You are the cause of this storm. Go back to your cabins, all of you! It's fear that is disrupting the field and wrecking the ship. If all of you just went and took a sleeping pill and laid down, when you woke up, the storm would be over!'

"Just as she said this I saw something white fly at her from the side of the room. It was a cup, and it hit the side of her head and broke, and she just fell down really fast. After that everyone rushed forward screaming toward the place she'd fallen. You could see a kind of frenzy there, and I got pushed off the table I was on and then forward toward the place. I didn't want to go but there wasn't anything I could do about it. After a while I kicked something with my foot and I looked down and it was a hat with a bobby pin stuck to the band...."

I stopped reading. "There's a bobby pin fastened to the page," I said, holding it up to show her. Just then the wind came up. The windows rattled in their casements and the candle flames guttered, tossing shadows around the room. Below the loft, the heavy drapes swirled out, brushing the floor.

"Weather's going to break soon," she said.

I felt a chill. I always did when there was going to be a storm. The wind and the smell in the air made me feel like I was supposed to remember something. There was a place in my head for the memory, but instead of something to remember there was only the hole. Something had happened to me once after a storm, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

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"It's Beth," Chase said. Then, a moment later: "May I keep this?"

"Sure." I got up quickly.

"You don't have to go."

But I did. I was afraid of that hole inside me. I was afraid it would swallow up the feeling I had for her. I did not want that to happen. I told her I had some dispatches to send off and I left her place and walked back down to the funicular. The operator had gone home for the day but the car could be operated with coins. I had only folding money, though, and the change machine was out of order, and so I had to walk down to the river by the old route, past the caves. There were fires burning inside some of them, and once or twice I felt the eyes of some of the hungrier occupants settle on me. I knew I was being sized up as a potential victim but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. I wanted them to come out, so I could make them not care about anything too. Maybe they sensed what I would do. In any case they did not come out.

Then, closer to the river, where the air grew heavy and hot, Matthew Bradey came back. He was walking beside me and I was myself again.

"You understand what I'm facing now, kid?"

"I think so," I said. I felt shaky.

"Tell me," he said.

"Okay. She's beautiful. You want to love her. Only you can't feel anything because you're dead inside."

"Not all dead. The part that isn't is the part that feels bad about it."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't feel sorry, kid. I'm just warning you that if you go on any further, that's what's going to happen to you, too."

"No, it won't," I said. "It's only a story. It's not real."

"No? You don't think it's real?"

Suddenly, the ground began to shake hard underneath me; I had to grab onto a root that was sticking out of the embankment to keep from falling into the water. I looked for Bradey, but he was gone, and so was the river. I was in a corridor, filled with smoke, and there were muffled explosions that rocked the deck, and dim figures in red robes and black ones running past. I was terrified. I had an overwhelming desperate desire to go home to my mother, and a sick, horrible feeling I was going to die.

I was on the *Morning Glory*.

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"Okay," I yelled. "Stop it!"

It did. I was sweating, still holding onto the root on the bank.

"That real enough for you, kid? Because that's what you're facing." Bradey started walking away.

"Hey, wait a minute — "

Bradey seemed to disappear into a swirl of dust that swept across the choppy green water of the river. Then the river itself and the whole scene dissolved and I was back in my cabin, sweating on my bunk with the handbook in my lap.

The *Stella* bounced like a bus on a bad, bad road.

SEVEN

I SAT UP. You could hear a low rumble that came through the deck and the bulkheads. Then a soft chime rang three times, repeated, and the image of Captain Pryzner appeared above the end of my bed.

"All ship's passengers. Please pardon the intrusion. However, we are currently passing through an interval of turbulence. This is something that occasionally happens during a crossing, and in most cases lasts no more than an hour or two. I want to assure everyone that the ship's field is perfectly stable, and that our automatic damping system should smooth out the ride before too much longer. In the meantime, please continue to enjoy your cruise. All ship's facilities remain open, and all scheduled activities, including the Mardi Gras festivities, will go forward as planned.

"For anyone experiencing any anxiety or queasiness due to this very slight turbulence, please ring your steward. He or she will be happy to provide you with a choice of several very effective remedies." The image of Captain Pryzner smiled and pointed to his wrist. "I know they're effective. I wear a pressure bracelet myself for just that reason. Again, enjoy your cruise. Thank you for your attention."

The chimes bonged again, the p.a. image snapped off. The *Stella* kept bouncing.

I came out of my cabin. The crew was stringing grab lines through loops in the bulkheads, and along the aisles of the salons and cafés. They moved expertly, waiting for the lulls between the waves. They did not seem overly

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worried. Meanwhile the passengers moved slowly along the ropes, hanging on as if they were walking along the edge of a cliff. I passed a restaurant, and saw people drinking out of wide bottomed cups and glasses. So the *Stella* really was equipped for turbulence, I thought. I did not want to use the word *storm*. It was just turbulence, like the Captain said. They had it occasionally, all the time.

On my way to the lift, though, I came up on an elderly woman who was holding onto the grab-rope. She seemed short of breath, and looked at me with an embarrassed, fearful expression. Suddenly her knees buckled and she sagged. I moved over quickly and caught her arm and helped her to stand up straight.

"Oh, thank you," she said. "I don't know what's the matter with me."

"Why don't I help you to your cabin?" I suggested.

I thought she would beam at me with gratitude but instead her eyes narrowed.

"Why do you want to go to my cabin?" she asked sharply.

"Well, because maybe you should lie down for a little while."

"No," she said, stiffening.

"But Ma'am, you look kind of sick — "

"I said no! Help! Steward, help me!"

I let go of her. She was yelling her head off and I felt this horrible panic sweep over me and I almost — *almost* — put my hand over her mouth to shut her up. Maybe I would have, too, if the steward hadn't shown up.

"What seems to be the trouble, madam?" he said.

"He's trying to *rob* me!" she cried, pointing a shaking finger at me.

"What has he taken, madam?"

"Why, nothing yet. But he's going to!"

The steward gave me a look. "You are in custody, sir. Please remain here until I return."

"What?"

"Please, sir," he added in a whisper. To the lady he said, "Thank you for assisting us in apprehending this thief, Ma'am," and led her way. A moment later he returned.

"Thank you for playing along with my little ruse, sir. It is sometimes necessary to mislead people a little when they are feeling anxious."

"Is that common?"

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"Oh, yes, sir. Anxiety is naturally higher, during turbulence. Oh, by the way, sir, I have a flying cylinder for you."

I steadied myself against the rail and opened the lozenge. The note rolled up inside was written on pebbly ship's stationery. The handwriting was hurried.

I tried to have ~~Oral~~ sex with GD on the bridge of the ship. We're in a storm, and I wanted to have sex with him, but he stopped me because he knew it was wrong because

I read it over six times.

"Is this for real?" I asked the steward.

"Oh, quite real, sir."

"When would this message have been sent?"

"Sometime tomorrow, most likely, sir. It's date-stamped from the ship's bridge."

Before I could ask him anything else, the *Stella* shuddered violently. You could hear things breaking inside the cabins. Then the ship settled down and there was only a slight vibration. There was a *brrrrr* sound and the steward pulled his call beeper from his belt and checked the display.

"Sir, if you are not in immediate need of my services, I do have a number of calls from the deck."

"Can you tell me where Audrey Pennebaker is right now?"

"Certainly, sir." He moved a thumbwheel on the beeper. "Yes. There she is. Deck G, in the Tropicana meeting room. Shall I have the G deck steward page her there?"

"No, thanks. I'll find her myself."

I took the lift down to G deck and found the Tropicana room. I went in without knocking. Audrey sat at a table with her father and some of the staff from the Revival.

"GD!" Audrey said, surprised.

"Can I talk to you a second?"

"We're kind of in the middle of something," she said, glancing at her father.

"Oh, talk to the boy," Reverend Pennebaker said. "He looks like he's pretty anxious."

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"I won't be long, Daddy." She got up and took my arm and we went out to the corridor.

"What's wrong, GD?"

"Have a look at this." I gave her the note. She read it and flushed deep red.

"You'd better explain yourself right now, mister!" she said angrily.

"Is that your writing?"

Audrey's voice tightened. "I would never write that. I would never *do* that!"

"Audrey. This came from the bridge tomorrow. The steward says there's no mistake."

Audrey's eyes flashed. "You've been reading that filth, haven't you."

"My reading has nothing to do with this note."

"I knew it! Just from looking at you I knew you'd been in that awful book. Now you're filled with it, aren't you. Thinking your dirty thoughts. Well you think them all you want, but keep them away from me. I don't ever want to talk to you again!"

Just then Reverend Pennebaker came out. "What's all the ruckus about, children?"

Audrey gave me a cold, haughty glance. "Just look at this message, Daddy," she said. And before I could say or do anything she gave it to him. Reverend Pennebaker read it slowly, rubbing the back of his neck. I tensed, sure he'd try to strangle me. But instead he looked at her.

"This *is* your writing, honey."

"Daddy!"

"Of course, you'd never do anything like that. But I've always preached that these flying cylinders were never intended to be a part of God's plan."

"What?" Audrey exclaimed. "Daddy, he's accusing me of something horrible. Look at those crossed-out words!"

"The young man didn't write this note, daughter." He looked at me and smiled strangely. "But I've always felt that these glimpses of the future are not good for us. It is not natural for anyone to know for certain of his or her fate. It changes a man. He tries to avoid the future and his very actions in so doing are what cause the predicted events to occur. The ancient Greeks understood the problem very well."

"I never meant for you to see that note, sir," I said.

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"No harm done. No one's done anything wrong yet, have they?"

"Of course not, Daddy!"

"Well, then!" With that, Reverend Pennebaker crushed the note between the palms of his two big hands, rolling it into a ball. He walked down the corridor and put it into a disposal chute.

"There, son," he said, coming back. "I have taken up your burden for you. Now let's not hear another word about it." He smiled like an indulgent parent. "Did you want anything else?"

"No," I said, glancing resentfully at Audrey. "I guess not."

"Good. Now we've got a few more things to work out here, so if you don't mind."

"Sure. I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Don't worry about it, son. We'll see you at the Grande Bal."

Audrey never looked at me as he held the door open for her, and they went back inside.

EIGHT

I WAS UPSET, and I went to see the only person I thought might be able to make sense of what was happening. George Johnson. I rang his cabin bell and heard a chair scraping the deck, and felt heavy footsteps. The door slid open. Johnson stood bare-chested, wearing only shorts and a pair of sandals. His long white hair hung over his eyes. His big chest was covered with white hair. It was flabby. He had a couple of old man's breasts in there, under all the hair.

"What the hell do *you* want?"

I told him about the cylinder, and what Reverend Pennebaker had done with the note. Johnson considered a moment.

"Oral sex, huh? So how the hell are you going to kill time till tomorrow, kid?"

"That's not what I'm worried about," I said through my teeth. "I think we're in a storm."

"Okay, keep your shirt on. Come in." He stood aside and I went into his room.

I don't think I've ever seen a filthier place. Dirty plates and empty glasses

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and bottles covered the floor. Clothes were everywhere. The desk was piled high with what you could only classify as rubble. He had a workstation, turned on, with a black antique typing machine in front of it that was bristling with stick-on notes. Beside it was a viewing platter with the image of a person facing the wall. There was a lot of room dust swirling around inside the beams. The only sign of neatness was a line of empty bottles by the sink. Johnson filled a pot with water and set it on a burner. It began boiling right away, and he poured it out into a cup that had a filter cone on top of it.

"Want some coffee? It's the real goods."

These Earthers and their "real" coffee, I thought, remembering how fond of coffee Gordy and Irene were. That gave me a little pang, thinking of them, and I wondered guiltily whether they were in trouble now because of me.

"No thanks."

Johnson came over with a steaming cup. There was a chair next to the bed strewn with papers, data buttons, envelopes, and mailing-tubes. He scooped aside an armload to make room to sit, and as he bent the ship tossed, spilling coffee onto his bare knees.

"Fuck!" he yelled, picking up some underwear from the floor to mop them with. He finished and sat back down.

"That doesn't bother you?" I said.

"What?"

"All this bouncing around."

Johnson sipped his coffee. "Kee-rice, that's hot!" He shook his head like a big lion. "I haven't even felt it, kid, and you know why? *I've been working!*"

"Working? On what? On a story?"

"Fucking right on a story! I couldn't believe it. Got up this morning and I thought about that red-haired son of a bitch, and I said to myself, I got me another villain. So I started the typer and damned if I didn't turn out a scene." He turned and pointed to the line of empty bottles by the sink. "Look at that. Poured out all the booze. I'm on it now, kid! I'm gonna write a book that'll knock 'em all on their asses. They won't be calling me washed up anymore."

"That's great," I said. "Really. But what about that note? Is there a storm?"

"Hell, I don't know. A storm's a funny thing. There's a lot of factors at work. You ever seen film of that bridge in Washington State?"

"No." I didn't even know where Washington State was.

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"A couple of hundred years ago they built a suspension bridge across the Tacoma Narrows. It was all lightweight construction, the latest thing. And to strengthen the deck, they built it with H plates on the sides. That looked good on the drawing board, but they didn't account for the aerodynamic effect of the wind coming up from the bottom of the gorge. One day it blew up just right, and the deck started to move, and the frequency just happened to be tuned with the cables and superstructure of the bridge, so it amplified the original effect. That deck rolled and twisted like it was made of rubber until finally the whole thing just collapsed into the river. Freak thing. They rebuilt it with slots cut into the side plates and it was okay.

"It's the same with this ship. It's different since the *Morning Glory*. They've made the hulls stronger. And they've got a couple of things they can do if the passengers go nuts. Now they've got gas. If things get out of hand they'll just knock everybody out cold. The field stabilizes, we roll over midpoint, and wake up on Tansis."

He got up and threw the dregs of his coffee into the sink. "So what do you want me to do, kid? You want to go up to the bridge and tell Mike that you're gonna get a blow job in his chair?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"You know what I think? *I* think you're jumpy because you've got a hard-on for that girl."

I was embarrassed and wanted to deny it, but I couldn't.

"Hell, I don't blame you. You're right in the middle of a tragedy."

"What tragedy?" I said sourly.

"*The* tragedy, kid. You want a girl and you can't have her. That's what I had going in the first book. Bradey wants Chase, but he can't have her. Not the way he wants. That's always a swell thing to put into a story. Two people belong together but can't be. The more mysterious the reason the better, too. Why don't the Montagues and the Capulets get along? Who the fuck knows? But you make it so they can't ever get away from it. People love that shit. Except when it's happening to them, of course."

Johnson clapped my shoulder. "But don't look so glum, kid. Always something fucking love up. Good thing, too, 'cause you've got too much fucking energy when you're in love. Too much to focus on one person. You've got to use part of it up climbing to the top of some other mountain. *Any* mountain. If you don't, you burn up. And if you try to hold it inside....

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Shit, then you've got *you.*"

"Thanks a lot."

"Don't take it like that. Hell, wish I was you. You know, when I was your age I used to look at guys like me. Fat rich old farts with nothing better to do but sit on their asses and brag about the old days, or about some piece of tail they bought with money. I swore I'd never be like that. But you can't help it. You know why? Because everybody stops fighting. They always stop as soon as they can, because it wears you down. So you start looking to avoid the hits. You get a nose for trouble, and when you smell it you get the hell out. Even though you need trouble. I do, anyway. Shit, I haven't had any trouble in *years.*"

"But you're a brawler," I said. "What about all those fights you're supposed to have had?"

"That's not trouble. I *like* to fight. Trouble's something you don't like. Something you're afraid of. That's what inspired me, kid. I saw you jump up in front of trouble. You didn't think twice about it! I came back here and did a lot of thinking. I said to myself, Johnson, you're either one of those rich old farts, in which case you should do the world a favor and shoot yourself in the head, or you still got some of that kid in you. Hey. Come over here."

Johnson lifted the chair that was in front of his workstation. I went over and sat down on it. The display floated pink and green in the air in front of my face. I jabbed at it with my finger and it went right through.

"Oh for chrissake. You're like a cat in front of a fucking mirror. Here. Type el ee oh."

I looked over the three rows of keys, found the *l,* and pressed down. When I did, a mechanical arm came up from the inside of the case and struck a hard rubber roller that was set on a movable carriage on the back. I hit the *e* and the *o* and the display floating in front of me changed to a nice wine color.

"Now hit the space bar. That's the long one at the bottom."

When I did, the figure on the platter rotated around to face me.

"It's Reverend Pennebaker!"

"No. *That* is Leo Zabrodie." The image was dressed in a long black frock coat and dusty boots. He was younger and a little less fleshy than Reverend Pennebaker, but it was him all right, right up to his carrot-red hair.

"On Tansis, you can get a license to give sermons for money on the street corners. Leo's a street preacher. He's very good at it, too. I've written a scene

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with him and my new hero. Here, type the word 'police' and hit the space bar again."

When I did, I felt myself rising, and shrinking, and turning, and I was standing on the plat! And Johnson was looking down at me with his arms folded and that grin on his face.

"How do you like it now, kid?" he said.

"What did you do to me?"

"How could I do anything to you? Didn't you say you wanted to see what I was working on?"

"Son! I say, son!"

I looked back over my shoulder. There was a tennis court. A tiny man in green coveralls watered the smoothly pounded red clay with a hose.

"Son? Do you talk English?"

And Zabrodie strode toward me along the gravel path. He carried a book under his arm, and his shoulders and the tops of his boots were powdered with red dust. As he came close his presence seemed to fill up the park. There was a force coming out of him that was confident and all-seeing. Like he thinks he's God, I thought. A street God with long flowing red hair.

"Tramping around, son?"

"What did you say?"

"I said, are you tramping around?"

"I'm here for the summer," I said. And I thought, *Johnson's doing them differently now. He's pulling the character out of my head!*

"Just in town?"

"Here and down the coast," I said —

— And I could actually *remember* going to the coast and how the ocean smelled different there than at Haven: spicier and smaller somehow. At Haven I would never go in the water. I thought it had to be corrosive. And things lived in the water that would devour you. But it had been good to swim at Nully. The water there was warm and clear, and there had been the cottage that belonged to her grandmother with the porch looking over the dunes, and fresh flowers on the table, and long dinners with glasses of blue wine that came from the Coats valley, just over the line of hills. And her.

Her, I though. She was still down there without me. We'd had a fight. She told me I couldn't stand paradise and I guess that was true enough.

"The tramping life gets lonely, doesn't it, son?" Leo Zabrodie said

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solicitously, bringing me back. "You look like you need somebody to talk to."

"I don't want to talk," I said.

"This isn't *free* talk, son," Zabrodie said. "This is talk you pay for."

"Pay?" I laughed.

"I have found that people don't mind paying for something of value. And when they do pay, they are fully prepared to receive the good news I've got to give them."

"What good news could there possibly be in this town?" I said.

"You want good news?" Zabrodie leaned close. "I have a piece of news that might interest you. And you can have it, son, for a *lui*. One brass button!"

"What kind of news?" I said.

He beamed at me, and for a moment I felt a little spear of the old happiness I had with her jabbing at my heart. And I knew *he* had done that to me.

"Hey," I said. "Knock it off."

"One *lui*. It's not much, is it, son? Why, I usually charge three, you know. You're getting the special tramper's rate!"

"All right!" I said, thinking that I'd give him the money to shut him up. Really, though, I wanted to feel that love again. Maybe I'd get a bigger dose now that I'd paid. I handed him a coin. He pinched it in his fingers and held it up to the light, then put it into his vest pocket.

"Thank you! Now, if you'd just close your eyes..."

I closed them. But I could still see. I was looking into a green-gray space. The color was the one Henry was painting at the end, the one we called *vast*. It was vast and gray-green and charged up somehow. I felt a tingle at the back of my neck.

Then the Network contact hit me full-force. I wasn't ready for it, and it knocked the breath right out of me. The Network bore down on me. What I felt was a primitive, desperate will to survive. It was as if the Network was a man holding onto the edge of a cliff, trying not to let go. *They're focusing on the ship*, I thought. *They're trying to keep the passengers calm.* I opened my eyes.

"Why do they care about this ship?" I said, but Zabrodie didn't hear me. He was looking over my shoulder at something. I turned and saw Johnson looking back at me and I rose off the plat and turned and landed hard back in the chair.

"I'm supposed to be the cops," Johnson said. "I'm about to roust

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Zabrodie for soliciting in the park, which is against the terms of his license."

"What's that about the Network?" I demanded.

Johnson frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I paid Zabrodie, and he told me to close my eyes and when I did, I picked up the Network. They're focused on this ship. They're trying to keep everybody calm. Why?"

"You little son of a bitch. There's no Network in that scene."

"I'm telling you there is."

Johnson gritted his teeth. "Look. I showed you this stuff because I thought you'd appreciate it. I haven't written anything this good for thirty years. Then you bring up the fucking Network. You let that fucking Lattrey get to you! Yeah, I know you talked to him this morning. What did he say? That I can only write when there's fliers around pushing the keys for me?"

"I'm telling you — "

"No. I'm telling you. Get the fuck out of here."

"Please listen to me, George! It's not the Count. I've felt them three times now. You know I'm sensitive to fliers. Why would I lie? You're a reporter, aren't you? Don't you want to know what's going on?"

Johnson put his nose right up against mine. His breath smelled like the cinnamon candies he'd been chewing the whole time I'd been there.

"Get this straight, Guide Dog. I'm no fucking reporter. I'm a *writer.* Now get the hell out of here."

"Listen to me — "

"Out!"

He pushed me back. The door opened behind me and my heel caught on the deck tiles and I tumbled out into the corridor.

"Fuck you!" he growled, as the door shut.

NINE

I WAS CONFUSED and angry and stung lying on the deck outside his door. "Fuck *you!*" I yelled back at the door.

"Sir? Is anything wrong?" It was the steward. He'd come up behind me.

"What do you want?" I said sourly.

"I've a message from Miss Pennebaker." He held out his arm and picked

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me up. "She asks whether it would be convenient for you to join her at the Palm Court now."

"All right. I'll go down."

I went down to the Promenade deck. It was crowded with passengers dressed in Krewe robes, shiny satins and the like in brilliant reds, golds, and greens. Bracing myself against possible Network contact, I went through the garden gate, but there wasn't any contact, only a strange, tingling vibration that seemed to pour right through me and made me a little dizzy. As I looked around for Audrey, I wondered how people could sit there and not feel that *field* driving through them. Maybe it was just me. Maybe I was the only one who didn't think it was, what had Audrey said? *Nourishing.*

I spotted her sitting on a bench alongside the fountain. She waved. I put on a stern face and went over.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I wasn't sure whether you'd want to see me or not."

"It's okay," I said coolly.

"Oh, GD, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Getting so angry at you. Giving that note to Daddy. Maybe that wasn't the right thing to do."

"I thought the Pennebakers always did the right thing."

Audrey lowered her eyes. "I deserve that, I suppose. But you should know that after you left, I kept thinking about how Daddy didn't even blink! GD, it made me realize. He's been acting strange ever since we left Haven."

How could you tell, I thought, but I asked, "Strange how?"

"He's all distracted, for one thing. You talk to him and it's like he's not really there. Before you came this morning, we were trying to finish all the arrangements for the Krewe, send out the rest of the bids, plan our part of the Grande Bal parade. He loves the Mardi Gras, GD, but this time he hardly paid any attention at all. Now I'm worried. Maybe he *is* brainwashed!"

"Speaking of brainwashed," I said, "look at those three."

I pointed to a table a little way off. Three people sat around it, all of them staring into hand-book readers. They were completely lost in them. Their faces were slack, and they hardly blinked their eyes.

"There's an awful lot of people reading around here," I said.

Audrey looked around.

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"Practically everyone," she said.

"Excuse me a second, Audrey. I want to see what they're reading."

I headed for the closest table, but I didn't get far. All of a sudden the *Stella* shuddered, smoothed for an instant. Then, with a wrenching lurch, she went over onto her port side.

For an instant, everything was still. Then came the noise. It was like an explosion, but continuous, a roaring, only broken up, a crash, only echoing repeatedly with the howling, tearing sound of furniture and fittings breaking loose and all of it — and passengers — fell across the core. They fell *slowly.* Something had happened to the gravity. I grabbed onto the side of a table and realized that I could hold on easily with just one hand. I looked over my shoulder and saw Audrey drifting away from me toward the first level of terraces that overlooked the palm court. She was kicking her feet and trying to swim through the air back to me. Then the table I was holding broke loose from the deck. I tumbled and spun and for a second I floated on top of a chair that was floating underneath another table that had a cup and a plate of salad passing over it. Then I tumbled away and grabbed hold of one of the big palm trees. Audrey was gone. I clambered up the trunk to the crown, got a good grip among the fronds, and tried to calm down.

There was a lot of screaming and shouting now. Mist from the waterfall wet my face and hair. The *Stella* vibrated and tried to stir like an old horse who's fallen and can't quite get up. I was scared as hell, and then the dizziness got to me and I felt *them* again. The Network swept over me full force, and it hurt.

It had never hurt before but this time it hurt like lye poured down my throat. And I knew it hurt for one reason: fear. The Network was afraid of what was happening to the *Stella.* I felt there were fliers who were afraid of dying. The Network was trying to protect them. I could feel it concentrating, and almost see what was happening back home on the Tree: all traffic stopped, all business suspending, no buzzing conversation, no flying. Everyone pulling up and concentrating on reaching out across the void. And, as I listened, I felt a wave of comfort. *They were trying to calm the passengers, too.*

Then, with another, long, horrible shudder, the *Stella* righted herself. Everything that had fallen to the port side and wasn't tangled in the rails or in the trees fell back toward the decks. The Network couldn't hang on. The

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contact snapped and disappeared, leaving an aftertaste of terror. The tree I held onto whipped back, and there was another long crashing groan that was a copy of the first and then the *Stella* was bouncing heavily and the fear of the passengers rose in the air. Everybody was choking on it. The gravity came back up and a lot of things and passengers fell heavily to the decks. People were running around. From the palm tree all the robes made a wild dance of color. Then my eyes started watering, and a sharp smell penetrated my nose and mouth and I felt dull and slack. The screaming began to die down. I blinked my eyes and looked around and there was Captain Pryzner. He was a giant, standing in the core of the ship. His hat was as big as the roof of a house, and you could see through it.

He started to talk.

"Attention all ship's passengers and crew. We have just experienced a severe list to port. We are taking every precaution that this will not occur again. However, because certain emotional conditions exist on the ship I can no longer guarantee that the remainder of the voyage will be free of turbulence. Therefore, I have activated the gas generators attached to the life support system.

"You are now breathing tranquilizing gas. The effects of this gas are designed to be gradual, and then sudden. There is an immediate calming effect which you are experiencing now. After a time this will be followed by a sudden lapse of consciousness which will last as long as the gas is pumped through the ship's quarters.

"All crew issued with antidote poppers are ordered to deploy them immediately. In addition, I give the following orders for ship's personnel:

"Doctor Davis and his staff will report to Le Parisien restaurant on the Promenade deck. Doctor Cramer and his staff will report to the Terrasse Café on the arcade level. Each team will bring necessary medical supplies and attend to the immediate needs of the injured.

"The purser, assistant purser, and chief steward will station themselves on deck A, deck C, and deck E, respectively. You will each direct your own staffs in assisting passengers who require medical care to the two medical sites. You will also identify passengers against the Passenger List and provide me with a total of injured and missing.

"The Chief engineer will assign a crew chief to Edie's Lounge on deck five to take reports of cabin and alleyway damage.

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"All hotel and victualing staff will report to the main dining room on deck six for assignments from the Assistant Chief Steward.

"Uninjured passengers will report immediately to their cabins. If your cabin is uninhabitable due to damage caused by the list, you will please report to Edie's Lounge on deck five, where you will be provided with temporary accommodations.

"Everyone: maintaining calm is our only hope of surviving these storm conditions. The field of the ship is sensitive to the combined emotional state of the passengers. Therefore, it is your duty to remain as calm as possible. You are to go to your cabin, lie down, and relax. The gas will make it easy for you to do so."

The captain's gigantic image paused. He turned his head slowly, as if he could see the entire complement of passengers and crew. I felt a chill, and when he spoke again his voice was firm and stern and vibrated the deck under my feet.

"Finally," he boomed, "it has come to my attention that a number of passengers are in possession of the hand-book *East of the Moon.*"

He waited. People below me were looking around guiltily at one another. Lots of them were. That hand-book was all over the place.

"All passengers in possession of this volume are to turn it over to your steward immediately. That is all. Now begin returning to your cabins."

The image of the Captain stood there with its arms folded, watching like a giant as everyone began to move. Slowly I climbed down the tree. It was hard to move, because the gas had made my legs feel so heavy, and because the ship was still tossing so badly. Everybody else moved slowly too. I got in the crowd that was being herded out of the Promenade deck and looked around for Audrey.

There was no sign of her anywhere.

Ten

"HIYA, KID," Matthew Bradey said softly into my ear as I walked up the grand staircase with the other passengers. "How'd you like the ride in that tree?"

I didn't answer. I knew I was seeing him because of a reaction to the field or the gas or both, and I didn't feel like talking to a

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hallucination.

"What's the matter, kid? You sore at me or something?"

"You can't be here," I said. "I don't have the book."

Bradey laughed. "You don't need the book anymore. I'm on the *p.a.!*"

"Go talk to somebody else, then."

"You *are* sore."

"I'm not sore."

"Weren't we getting along? Wasn't I showing you a good time? We were getting to like the girl, too. Don't you want to see her again?"

"No, I don't."

"Liar."

"Fuck you!"

"Hey, fuck *you!*" said a passenger walking in front of me, looking back. One of the security people came over.

"What's going on?"

"He just said fuck you to me!"

"I wasn't talking to you," I said. "Mind you own business."

"Fuck you!"

"I've got this thing on my belt," the crewman said. He unclipped the black prod. "You kind of lay it in between the shoulder blades and press this red button? Then you don't worry anymore about who said fuck what to who."

"Talk to him about that."

"I said I was talking to myself."

"Shut the fuck up, both of you. And keep moving. When that gas hits I don't want to have to drag your sorry, sleeping asses back to your cabins!"

"Whew!" Bradey said a moment later. "Did you know that in a recent survey of passengers who cross on big liners, the crew of the *Stella* was rated most polite?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"What've you got such a black ass about? It has to be about her."

"It's just a book," I said.

"Yeah? Well, maybe you don't remember how you felt when you found out she'd been doing something you didn't like."

All of a sudden I broke out of the crowd. I wanted a drink, and looked across the boulevard at the tables outside the Griffin. They were all full. Then

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I saw Jacob Kahane sitting alone. He was writing something; he stopped, took off his glasses and held them up to the light, cleaned them with a handkerchief and put them on again. I didn't want to sit with Kahane but I really did need that drink after everything that had happened and there were chairs free at his table so I went over. He kept on writing.

"Must be a good letter," I said, sitting down.

"Oh. Hello, Matt." He showed a quick, mysterious smile, then screwed the cap on his pen. "Just setting down a few thoughts."

The waiter was very busy. He did not want to come over but I got him over anyway by looking at him hard.

"It's extraordinary," Kahane was saying. "A week ago, I couldn't think of anything. Now it's hard to put down all I want to say. It's like a flood, Matt. I've started working on the book."

"Congratulations," I said.

"Thanks. Of course, I owe it all to you, in a way — "

He stopped short before he could say why he owed it to me. He turned pale. I spotted Frances walking directly across the boulevard toward our table.

"Why, hullo, Matt! And Jacob. Isn't it lucky you've caught him, Matt, when I've been looking for him all afternoon?" She smiled brightly, through a lot of lipstick, and sat down.

"I've been here since three, Frances," Kahane said with a smile. "You know I've been here writing every afternoon this week."

"Oh, yes. It's just that I forgot today. Do you know, Matt, that Jacob finally realized that he could not write in our flat? According to Jacob, the air is too still and too heavy. That's what you said, isn't it? There are too many heavy draperies, and he doesn't like the heavy way the pictures are framed. Of course he doesn't talk about what's inside the frames. He's never been interested in that. He only cares about the outside of things. That's why he's more worried about where he does the writing than what he's actually writing down. Isn't that so, Jacob?"

Kahane was still smiling. "I only meant that it's been so hot, Frances."

"And when it's hot, you have to leave. That's perfectly reasonable. Anyone would understand that. Only he never left before when it was hot. He always told me he liked it hot. That's when I was most likely to sweat, you see. He was always keen on my sweating."

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Kahane was still trying to smile. Frances looked at me brightly and went on. "He's always said that sweat was the one thing you absolutely had to have in a mistress. And, of course, a mistress is all he's ever wanted."

"Frances."

"That's all. He used to ask me all the time. You remember, don't you, Jacob? He would ask, was I his mistress, and then I would say that I was. Wasn't that exciting, Jacob? It's so exciting to have a mistress. Especially one that sweats the way I do."

"Frances, for God's sake — "

"I don't see what God's got to do with it. God doesn't have to be involved at all. Did I ever mind? I wanted to be your mistress whenever you said so. But then Jacob had a problem, you see, because we were to be married. And if we married, then I couldn't be his mistress anymore. Could I? And Jacob simply has to have a mistress. He's told me so, many times. So now he's got a new one. That Chase one."

It was strange, hearing it from her. I felt lighter, somehow as though I was rising from the chair.

"I'd better go," I said. "I've got some work to finish up at the office."

Kahane looked at me. He looked ill. I knew he wanted to try to explain things to me but there was nothing to say, and anyway, Frances wasn't through with him yet. I got up and crossed the street. On the other curb I turned back and saw her leaning close to him, talking fast. Then both of them turned their heads to look back at me and I hurried down the boulevard and crossed the park to the office. It was late and only Madame Vosg, the night clerk, was in. She was setting up dispatches in the queue. I said hello to her, went upstairs, and opened up the safe, and took out my copy of Beth's diary.

I looked at it and felt dull and rotten. I did not care at all what Chase did. It was not her fault that Kahane had fallen in love with her. Everybody fell in love with her. She had that ability, or call it a quality like magnetism, that drew people to her. She could not help it, really. It was not her fault that I had fallen in love with her, either. What was her fault was loving me back.

That had nothing to do with the magnetic quality, of course. But I had this theory that Chase could control the magnetism and that if she ever truly fell in love she would turn it off and that since she was in love with me she would do that for me. It was a grand theory. Only she hadn't turned the magnetism off. Kahane had fallen straight toward her and stuck. Chase

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couldn't do anything about it. They hadn't made a magnet yet that would stick to only one thing and not to anything else.

I had a cigarette and lay down and read in the diary for a while. Beth had a crush going for one of the assistant stewards in second class. She wrote a whole page describing his hands. She seemed to believe you could tell a lot about someone from their hands. She was very generous in her description of them. She felt the steward had courageous hands. He had been very disciplined and brave so far in the storm, even though he was on his first crossing, and away from his family for the first time. He was going to be brave for everyone, she said. You could tell, because his fingers were practically all the same length.

Ship shaking us like popcorn in a pan, Beth wrote.

ELEVEN

SOMETIME LATER I began to choke. I opened my eyes in a panic and saw a man with white hair and a beard was looking down at me. It was George Johnson. He popped something underneath my nose, and the smell practically lifted me off the ground, and I was not in Tansis anymore. I was in bed, in my cabin.

"Get up!" Johnson said.

Wrapped around his forehead was a bandage with a splotch of blood soaked into the middle of it. He was wearing a black robe with a green crest of a chariot with starfish-spoked wheels, pulled by twin sea horses. He had strands of green and red Mardi Gras beads twisted around his thick neck. The robe was cinched with a belt that had a flashlight and one of the prods the ship's security people used to herd the passengers hanging from it. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder, too. My head began to clear. I realized that the *Stella* was not bouncing anymore.

"Put this on." Johnson dropped a bundle on the bed, and unrolled a white robe. It was a Mardi Gras robe with the shield of King Neptune on it.

"Why? What's going on?"

"There's been a mutiny, kid. The ship's been taken over by the Proteus Krewe."

"Lattrey's Krewe?"

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"That's right, kid. Hurry up."

"But that's a Proteus robe," I said.

Johnson gave me a look. "It's a disguise, you stupid fuck!"

"Hey!"

"Get the fucking robe on!"

I got up and started pulling the robe over my head. "How'd they take over the ship?"

"After the gas came on, the real crew went for their poppers. Only there weren't any. Proteus people had ripped the whole supply. They knew what was coming. Now they've got the ship and it's up to us to take it back. Here."

"I thought you were working," I said, remembering how he had thrown me out of his cabin. Johnson grinned.

"Remember what I said about trouble? Well, we've got some." He had what looked like black eggs in his hand. At the end of each one were two buttons, one red and one green.

"What's those?"

"Gas grenades. Different stuff. Poppers don't work against it, and they'll knock out anybody who isn't wearing a mask. Here. Put 'em in your pockets. They're armed, so be careful. You want to use one, press the red button. Okay, now here."

Johnson gave me a cowl. He showed me the elastic collar inside that would fit snugly around my neck, and explained how I could activate the ten minutes of air the cowl provided by biting down on the capsule inside the hood.

"Throw first, then bite. You got that?"

"Yes, but — "

"But what, kid? You want them to have the ship? Let Lattrey turn it over again?"

"No, but — "

"No but nothing. You and I are the only good guys left. Maybe you don't care either way, but I don't want to die. Not when I'm working this good! Now, let's go."

We went out to the deck. All the regular lights along the alleyway were out, and the bulkheads glowed faintly under emerald emergency lamps. The cabin doors were all open. I saw overturned beds, luggage and personal items scattered about. Bodies lay everywhere.

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"They're not — "

"Dead?" We stepped over a woman. "Not most of 'em. They're all out cold with the gas."

We reached the lift. Johnson pulled out the stun rod, looked back and forth, and stepped back as the lift door opened. It was empty.

"Put your cowl on," Johnson said. "Get the capsule in your teeth. Throw when I give the word."

I nodded. I could feel the weight of the grenades in the pockets. The lift slowed and the door opened and we were on the bridge deck. The bridge circled the lens at the very top of the torus. There were six tough-looking armed guards in black Proteus robes flanking the entrance to the bridge. Johnson had his rifle pointed at me, as though I was his prisoner. That was enough to make them hesitate.

"Now," Johnson said.

He rolled two grenades to their feet. I bounced one. They all went off and filled the corridor with chalk-thick green smoke. I bit down on the capsule and sucked ice-cold air that expanded in my mouth with a hiss. The smoke cleared a little. We opened the bridge hatch and went in.

The bridge had a 360-degree view of the outer surface of the hull, and what lay outside the ship. You could see the huge gray hull wobbling slightly. The space, or aether, or whatever it was we were crossing, seemed to be composed of violet clouds cut through with rainbow star-tracks. At intervals there were flashes that washed everything out and cast sharp shadows across the bridge. It was like heat lightning at the end of a hot summer day. In the con chair up on the dais sat Captain Pryzner. He was tied up and seemed to be unaware that we had come in. The stations were all manned by people in Proteus robes.

"Do your stuff, kid," Johnson said.

"That's George Johnson!" It was Audrey's voice, from the rear of the bridge. She was there with her father.

"Audrey?"

"GD?"

I could see they weren't being guarded. They must be in on the mutiny, I thought. It made sense, because Lattrey and her father were allies.

Audrey looked at Johnson angrily. "What are you doing to him?"

Johnson said, "You turned the ship on its ass, and I'm turning it back."

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"You are *so* foul," she said in a quivering voice.

"Never mind zat, my dear." It was the Count. He was wearing a cowl, but there was no mistaking his size or that accent. "We will take care of Mr. Johnson. You will not have to conzern yourself wis him."

I had a grenade in my hand. All I had to do was press the red button and throw it. But Audrey was looking at me so wide-eyed.

"Do it, kid," Johnson said. "I'm out."

"Don't, GD," Audrey said. "You don't know — "

Johnson took the grenade from my hand and set it off. He held it in his gloved hand until it popped and the smoke started to billow out of it. Heavy green smoke began to settle to the floor. I heard people coughing, and thought I saw the Count running away. Then, suddenly, my cowl was yanked off my head.

"Sorry to do this to you, kid," Johnson said. "But I've got business to take care of. You did a good job, though."

I tried to hold my breath and go out the door after him but somehow the gas got into my head anyway. Everything turned kind of light and fizzy then, and I decided it would be a good idea if I sat down and rested.

Twelve

THE THING was, this gas was a little different from the first gas. With this gas I never really went all the way out. I could see the clouds of it still billowing out of the grenade, and see the forms of people stretched out on the deck. I saw Audrey. She looked peaceful. The gas smelled all right. It was the kind of thing you didn't mind breathing. I was getting to be quite a connoisseur of gas.

Look at her there, I thought. She isn't afraid. She'd be glad to die, in fact, because she believed in God. And her God took care of His own. I wasn't one of His own, so it was an open question whether He would take care of me or not. Maybe He would do it, though, for Audrey's sake.

"He'll do it for *your* sake, son," Leo Zabrodie said. "That's why He died on the Cross."

I heard his voice and all of a sudden it was hot, and there was that brassy sky overhead, and the red dust powdering the benches and the leaves of the

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trees that shaded the path, and the pounded-dirt tennis courts that were empty in the heat. I was back in Tansis.

"The Cross? Well, see, that's something I don't quite understand. Was that really necessary? I mean Adam and Eve messed up. But what's the deal making their descendants pay for the crime? *We* didn't have anything to do with it."

Zabrodie smiled indulgently. "Come on, son. Let's walk a little. When it gets like this, you have to make your own breeze."

We started along the graveled path. The park was deserted. The sky had turned a dun green color, and the air was heavy, too. It was absolutely still, and full of electricity.

"Weather's turning right around," Zabrodie said.

"What do you want?" I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to tell you a few things. You might say, on George's behalf. See, your friend George was testing himself, writing me."

"What do you mean?"

"There's things about himself he can't quite remember. That hole inside him he talked about in the first book. It's still there. Sometimes he waits around the edge of it, hoping things will come out." Zabrodie chuckled. "And sometimes he just plain goes fishing. This time, though, he thinks he's onto something. He came up with me. See, I live in that hole, son. I know what he doesn't know. Question is, how much is he gonna be able to see? 'Cause he's afraid of me. That's what I mean by a test. Whether he can look me in the eye and get what he wants to know out of me."

He stopped then and looked down the path. "Well, well. Look who's coming."

Coming toward us up the path, striding with his head down and his hands in his pockets, was Matthew Bradey.

"Well, well, well," Zabrodie repeated. "Good to see you again."

"What lies are you telling the kid?" Bradey said ominously, standing in front of Zabrodie with his legs slightly spread.

"Why, we're only having a nice chat. Isn't that right, son?"

"Don't answer him," Bradey said.

"Now, you don't have to be like that."

"He's a good kid. I don't want you fucking him up."

"The way I, to use the Anglo-Saxon term for rutting, fucked you up?"

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"In your dreams, Zabrodie," Bradey said.

Zabrodie laughed. "*My* dreams. What about your dreams? Why, I'm nothing but a thinly disguised version of Reverend Pennebaker. When you saw him, your stomach turned right over, didn't it? But you couldn't quite figure out why. The tail end of your dream always fizzes right out of your head!

"Should I tell you why you had that dream? What Reverend Pennebaker really did to you back in Tansis, all that time ago? You made him into a fictional character. Somebody you could humiliate at will. Because the truth was that he — "

Bradey stepped up, caught the front of his jacket and twisted it hard.

"You forget who's who around here, *Reverend.* I'm famous. They've got classes about me at universities. They've got *laws* about me on the books in three worlds. Nobody knows *you* yet. I'm not that scared old man up there, *Reverend.* I *know* what you did!"

Zabrodie's eyes widened. "You'd better calm down, son!"

"You worked for the government, didn't you? They brought you in to help brainwash people after the war. You specialized in off-worlders. In fact, they assigned my case to you, didn't they?"

"Let — go of me!"

"No. *You let go. You* get out of my head." His hands squeezed together. Zabrodie's face darkened and his eyes bulged. "You want exorcism? I'll show you exorcism. Get out of my head. *Get out now!*"

Zabrodie slumped. Bradey let go and the street preacher collapsed in a heap on the path.

"Son of a bitch." Bradey smoothed the front of his black shirt, took out a cigarette, turned his back to the wind and tried to light it. His hand shook, and he couldn't get a match to hold long enough to do it. We heard thunder. It was louder, and much harsher than the thunder I used to hear in the Tree. This thunder had no soft edges. It was more of a crash, like a whole mountain of glass heated red-hot until it cracked.

"We'd better get the hell out of here." He pulled the unlit cigarette from his mouth and spat pieces of tobacco. "All hell's going to break loose when they find him."

So we hurried through the park gates at the Boulevard Fornzo. There was a vista along the broad avenue all the way down to the river, and you could

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see a dark curtain of shadow where the rain was hovering there, and foamy spray from the water churning against the quays and the trees wringing their branches like old women grieving at a funeral. The curtain of rain moved closer, and the wind blew so hard you could barely walk against it. Bradey pulled my arm and led me into the shelter of a brick wall. Opposite us, above the cobbled street, a window banged open and shut. The glass broke. Pieces fell and shattered at our feet.

"What did you mean by brainwashing?" I said. "What did he do to you?"

"I'll show you, kid," Bradey said. "Come on."

Then all of a sudden I was Matt Bradey running through the rain. It was cold and peppered my face. I got down to the river and ran along the quays. It was very dark. The lights of the swimming barge at Chons were turned on and the green water churned under the lights and washed over the gray boards of the deck. I tried to stay in the shelter of the buildings and finally I reached Lincan and went upstairs.

I drew a bath. It was comforting to sit in the warm water hearing the rain drive against the windows. I read the papers, looked at the Recent Arrivals to see who had come in on the latest crossing, and checked the racing results. Finally the water grew cold and I climbed out and dried off and lit the gaslight over the round table in the front room and tried to answer some letters. But I couldn't get started on any of them, and finally I gave up and went to bed.

I was too tired to sleep, though. My legs ached and I lay on my back. It didn't seem to make any difference whether I closed my eyes or not. Either way I could see that smug look of possession on Jacob Kahane's face when he told me he'd gone down to Nully with Chase.

Of course, she'd gone away with plenty of men before I'd ever met her, and a few since we'd met. I didn't mind. I'd even met Phello, the man she was engaged to marry, who had one of the old Tanisian titles and an estate far up north where there was snow all year round and there was plenty of timber and some kind of cattle that lived on the heavy moss that grew on the trunks of trees. Phello was okay, though. I liked him. He was older and tall for a Tanisian and Chase seemed quite fond of him. He calmed her down and I could see it was a good thing, and didn't care when they slept together.

But with Kahane, I did mind.

When you get close to somebody you get the idea you both think the same way about other people. I had never thought much about Kahane before

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Chase. He was around and I sometimes had a drink with him or played a game of tennis, but I never thought about him. When I did see him he would talk about Frances or about the plot of his next book and I would listen to it all, but as soon as he left I'd never give any of it a second thought. So naturally when Chase met him I thought she would treat him the same way. I never imagined she would go away with Jacob Kahane. And, of course, he was the one I hated for it.

I went on thinking things like that for a long time. Finally all my thoughts just seemed to have a life of their own and I drifted off, with the gaslight swinging in the drafts blowing in from the storm.

Sometime later, I heard a row on the stairs. Someone had pulled the bell and now there were loud voices outside. The door opened. Madame Lusage was trying to keep someone from coming in. She had her thick, flabby arms spread out against the doorjamb, blocking the way. Chase Kendall stood over her with her hat cocked and a little amused smile on her face.

"Oh, Mister Bradey," she cried over her shoulder. "This one is drunk!"

"Don't be an ass!" Chase said.

"You have nozzing to say! You go!"

"It's all right, Madame Lusage. I'll see her."

Reluctantly, Madame Lusage let go of the doorway. She went away muttering. Chase came in, and leaned back against the door with a sigh.

"You *are* drunk," I said.

"Am not," she said. "It's this weather. Just need to comb my hair." She peered at me. "*You* look absolutely rotten, though! Do you feel rotten?" She tossed her hat onto the table and sat down next to me on the bed. She smelled like cigarettes.

"Where've you been, Chase?" I said. "Were you out with Jacob Kahane?"

"Don't you know better than to ask foolish questions?"

I turned away from her.

"Oh, Matthew." She stroked my hair. "You're so damned silly sometimes."

"I don't care. I'm sick of it!"

"That's exactly why you look the way you do. But you mustn't feel sick about anything. Haven't I told you over and over again that you're the one I love? You know it. It's silly for me even to have to say it."

"I hate it that you see him."

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"But I have to see someone, Matthew. Don't I? It's good it's him. You know he can't really touch me. I don't feel anything when I'm with him."

"And what do I feel?"

"Nothing but love and hate." She smiled and pressed down on my shoulder and got me to turn back to her. Her face looked soft and beautiful in the light that came through the windows. She lowered it and kissed me. For a moment, we were alone together inside the silver canopy of her hair.

"I won't see him anymore, if that's what you truly want. But it can't hurt us. And it actually seems to do him some good."

"I don't care about him!"

"Shhhh, darling. Of course you do. You care too much. That's your whole trouble. You never worried about him before, and now you worry about him all the time. And meanwhile you've completely forgotten how I love you so."

Chase unfastened the top button of my shirt, and then the others, and laid her hands on my chest. I shivered, but then like always the feeling just quit. I felt warm desire flowing down and evaporating into nothing. I pulled her hands away.

"Oh, Chase, it's no good!"

"Matthew," she whispered. "Just lie back and try not to think for once."

But I had to think, as I felt her moving down, of how it had been before the war. Then I had been fully functional, and I could remember what that felt like. But memory wasn't enough. It never was. She was doing things to me and I couldn't even feel them.

"Don't," I said, lifting her chin so she would stop.

When I looked down at her it was Audrey Pennebaker who looked back.

THIRTEEN

HER WHITE satin robe had slipped off one shoulder. Most of the lights were out. The *Stella* rolled and shook and groaned like a great tormented beast.

"Darling," Audrey said again. All the feeling that just an instant before had been blocked now rushed down where it wanted to go. It was hard, very hard, to sit up and lift her shoulders to make her stop.

"Don't," I said.

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The ship rocked and shook and I heard explosions and distant shouts. In front of the con hovered a scene from Johnson's book. It was the inside of Bradey's apartment. The ship's p.a. system was still on. That scene had been going out all over the ship.

"Audrey. Look at the p.a. We were in Johnson's book."

"I don't care." She moved in again.

"Listen to it out there, Audrey! We're in a storm. The ship's going to break up!"

Reluctantly, Audrey came back. She shook her head and looked around and her eyes got wide. She saw how she had unfastened my trousers and rolled away.

"How could you!" she cried.

"I *stopped* you, Audrey."

She shook her head "No! You...read that filth and then you tried — "

"Don't you remember that note, Audrey? We were both in the book, and I came out of it first and I stopped you!"

She was crying now. All of a sudden I was angry at her. So superior all the time, so smug, so right, so *holy*. I got up, hanging onto the bridge rail, and threw myself across the bridge toward the con.

"Captain. Is there any way to send a cylinder from the bridge?"

He looked at me. Only part of him had heard me. The rest of him was trying desperately to hold onto the field, keep the ship together. Then he turned his head and looked down. There was a receptacle and a supply of lozenges built into the arm of the con chair. I took a lozenge, unfurled the message blank inside and pulled a pen from Pryzner's uniform pocket. Then I stumbled back to Audrey and put the pen into her hand.

"Write it," I said.

"What?" she moaned. The ship listed sharply.

"I said write! I tried to have sex — "

"No!"

"Damn you, write it down! I tried to have sex — no, *oral* sex — with GD on the bridge of this ship. Write it! You know you already did it, now write it down!"

She was sobbing, but she copied down the words.

"We're in a storm. Write it! *We're, in, a storm!* And I wanted to have sex with him, but he stopped me because he knew it was wrong, because

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we're in a storm and nobody's sane anymore! Not her God, not her Daddy, not even her!"

"I hate you!" she sobbed.

"Oh, shut up!" I said furiously, snatching the note away. Just to make it authentic, I scribbled over the words *oral sex* before rolling it up and putting it into the lozenge. I crawled back to the Captain.

"Send this to me yesterday, Captain. Can you do that?"

He nodded slowly. He fumbled with the receptacle but got it closed and entered my passenger ID. A red light blinked on and off. Pryzner opened the receptacle again. It was empty. I shook Pryzner's shoulder and he blinked and looked around and seemed to recognize me. The ship shook again; and he tensed, trying to fight it.

"They turned the gas...off," he murmured.

"How do you control it?"

"There."

He lifted his arm through the p.a. image of Bradey's room in front of him and pointed to a console that was smashed and burned. I went to it anyway. All the controls were fused.

"Is there an emergency bypass?"

"Outer hull," Pryzner said weakly.

"Where?"

"C deck."

"What do the controls look like?"

Slowly, Pryzner's fingers touched a pad at the end of the chair arm. A hard copy materialized in front of him and floated down to his lap. Then the *Stella* twisted horribly, throwing me against the aft bulkhead. I put my arms around Audrey and tucked my head as everything that was loose on the bridge rained down on us. For an instant, it seemed as though the ship would finally break, but it didn't. Once again the *Stella* valiantly fought to right herself, did, and settled. Pryzner moaned. His eyes rolled back in his head then. He was unconscious. I took the hard copy of the control diagram and left the bridge.

"Wait!" Audrey cried, catching up. "I don't want to stay in there alone."

"You hate me, remember?"

"I don't hate you, GD. I hate myself, because I wanted to — "

"Never mind that now. We've got to get that gas back on."

I took her hand and we went out into the corridor, moving between the

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swings of the ship. You could see amber-tinted smoke rising through the core, and hear shouts, and things breaking, and sometimes muffled explosions. We went for the lift. It was broken, so we took the stairway.

C deck was howling. It was the center of the ship, and the passengers had fled there as they would have to the boat deck of a sailing ship that was sinking. Everything was wrecked. Everyone was drunk or crazy. They wore Mardi Gras costumes that were torn, and they yelled and pushed past and tore at each other wild-eyed as the *Stella* rocked and pitched and rolled. I heard big, booming laughter coming from the core and looked out and there was Pryzner's huge projection sitting in the command chair in the middle of the waving trees. He was sitting at the table in Matt Bradey's flat with Chase Kendall's hat on his head. The ship swung again and the image flickered. I found the hatchway to the outer hull, and then a hooded Krewe all robed in white satin with the green trident patch surrounded us. Audrey gasped. It was the Krewe of Neptune. Its chief took her wrist and stared at her with burning eyes.

"Who you running with now, girl!"

"N-nobody, Daddy!"

"Daddy!" He looked back at his Krewe. "Any a you see anybody's *Daddy* round here!"

"You're hurting me!"

"Harlot!"

I yelled and lunged forward, throwing a left hook as the Krewe collapsed around me. I pushed somebody off to get some room, aimed for a mask with my right and connected, swung back with an elbow. Then the ship rose and tossed us like a box full of toys and I heard Audrey scream and I caught her arm and pulled her free. The Krewe scattered.

"Let me go! Daddy needs me!"

"He doesn't even know you, Audrey. He's out of his mind! Everybody is!"

I heard people running up behind us and I pulled Audrey into an empty cabin. A Krewe passed dressed in Proteus black. They ran crazily, whooping and running after the Neptune Krewe, falling when the ship lurched but tumbling forward and picking themselves up and going on. I waited a moment, didn't hear anyone close, and went through the door that led to the service gangway into the relative quiet and dark between hulls.

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I looked down. You could really see how the ship was twisting, by the way the stairs screwed underneath us and whipped back. At the landing was the gangway that led to the outer hull. The hatchway was open and the gangway bounced up and down like a springboard. Audrey clutched at me as the ship pitched violently again. She was wild-eyed now, and pulled me close.

"Let's go back into the book," she said. "If we have to die I want to be in Tansis, with you."

"I've got to get to the gas, Audrey!"

"It doesn't matter...."

I could *feel* her give into the craziness. It was like an acrid mist in the air that ate at your hope and courage until all you had left was your fear. It was too much for her; she slumped against the rail of the gangway. I called her name and she turned her head and I could see that she didn't know who I was or where she was, and that got to *me*, deep inside. All this sick despair twisted my guts right up and over the top of my head until I was blind with it. *So this is what it was like*, I thought, remembering Beth's diary entries from the *Morning Glory*. *You just let it take you....*

I heard Audrey mumble Matt Bradey's name. I was Matt Bradey, only here I didn't suffer from my old problem. Here I could have her. I looked down. Her legs were bare underneath her robe. She moaned softly and moved her hips. I could see she was wet, and we were both going to die anyway. I knelt and touched the inside of her leg.

Earth Dog.

I knew that hissing sound, that imitation of a word. I knew its pitch and timbre. It belonged to Henry.

"No," I said. "Not now."

Look at me, Earth Dog.

I tried not to look. But the sound of its voice was like a magnet. I looked and ahead of me was a green mist floating over the rail. It stood with its wings folded, its great, disky eyes gleaming translucent as porcelain plates.

"What do you want?" I said.

It said nothing.

"Wait. I get it. You're supposed to carry me off, right? Take me to wherever it is I'm supposed to go when I die? Did you ask them to let you come pick me up?"

What do you mean by that, Dog?

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"I'm sure you're not a painter now, are you? You look clean. You don't have all that old paint on you anymore."

Well. It's true they don't appreciate art the same way here.

"Because everybody's an artist in heaven, right? *Are* you in heaven?"

The green mist looked at me. I could sense the old, familiar amusement washing over me like a wave, but it didn't have the same effect on me it used to have. Now it was just water rolling over oily ground.

You always want to talk about art, Dog. Even now.

"What else is there to talk about? Death? Letting your best friend down?"

How did I let you down?

"I'll tell you how," I said angrily. "You knew what would happen to me if you killed yourself. You knew the Network would blame me. When you killed yourself, you killed me too!"

But you are not dead, the mist pointed out dryly.

"Not yet. But why couldn't you have done it another way? Why didn't you leave me out of it? Why didn't you think of me, Henry? We don't live very long. How hard would it have been for you to stick around another fifty years, until I got old and died?"

That could not be.

"But why!" I shouted. "Why'd you ever start with me if it wasn't to be? Why choose me? Why'd you get inside me, and let me inside you if you weren't going to finish what you started? You taught me everything I know, you taught me who I was, you were everything, Henry! Everything! You can't just do that to a person and then turn your back on them. You've got a responsibility!"

Dog —

"No. I don't want to listen!"

Patrick, it said softly.

Henry had never said my name before. I didn't think it even knew what it was. But it did know, and it said *Patrick* again.

We are on this ship. We need you to help us. That is why we let you go. So you can save this ship.

"Why should I save it?"

Because you're a Guide. That is your training. You are devoted to us. No matter how you try you can't deny what you are. You are a Guide,

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Patrick. You cannot let us come to harm.

Henry raised a misty wing in the direction of the hatchway.

"Why are you on this ship?"

It didn't answer. The green mist started to fade.

"Henry!"

Guide Dog, came the fading hiss of its voice. Then it was gone.

I looked down at Audrey. I still had the hem of her gown in my hands. I tore it off, and ripped the material into strips that I knotted together into one long strip that I used to lash her waist to the rail of the landing. I did not want her to be thrown off the gangway while I was gone.

"Audrey. I'm going out to the other hull. I'm going to try to turn the gas back on."

"Daddy," she moaned.

"We'll find him later, Audrey."

The gangway had torn loose from its mounting and as the ship bounced and wobbled, the gap between the end of it and the outer hull landing widened and shrank. I waited for the ship to settle between swings, and launched off the end, tumbling forward and through the hatch to a platform on the inside of the torus.

Now there was a high rail in front of me and beyond it the vast, stale smelling interior of the hull. Below me, the field generator was an unsteady glowing line pulsing faint red with bursts of violet that faded back to red again. Crossing it above and below were long horizontal struts that connected the rings that formed the skeleton of the hull. I looked up, and as my eyes became accustomed to the light, I saw tubular ductwork and the equipment I had to use mounted on the side of the support ring that also held the platform I now stood on. I took a breath, and began climbing the ring.

It wasn't easy. I was climbing up and inward and soon encountered struts that had broken with the pressure of the storm and blocked my progress. I inched around the first one by pressing my back into the thin skin of the hull. The second time I had to hang on and swing my legs up and around the obstacle. All the while the *Stella* rolled like a drunk. I got my foot up, lost my grip, dangled over nothing. Then the ship swung my way, and I got my feet planted where I wanted again and clambered the rest of the way to a catwalk that led to a maintenance platform that surrounded the valve housing. Directly in front of me was a panel with the manual bypass controls.

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Sitting in front of it was George Johnson.

"I've been waiting for you, kid," he said.

FOURTEEN

JOHNSON'S WORDS were slurred. He had a bottle of wine in his hand. "Wanted t'tell you they were right. Right all along. I can't write without *them*. They've been here the whole time. Ever since we left Haven. This ship's a fucking Trojan Horse!"

I did not know what he meant by a fucking Trojan Horse. The *Stella* groaned terribly and slipped, the guy wires humming like the strings of a huge, broken down piano. Johnson kept talking.

"They made me remember things. Things I forgot a long time ago. About when I was a journalist in the war. When I was with Lattrey's resistance battalion."

"You fought with Lattrey?"

"*Captured* with him." Johnson shook his head. He drank from the bottle. "We strung a net across the mouth of this gully. Caught two of them. They were tangled in the net and one of them let loose with mounds of green foam. Lattrey went in there with a short knife. He got the stuff all over him but he went in there anyway and finished it. Then he had trouble with the second one. He yelled for me to come down and help him. So I did, and I got the stuff all over me, too.

"At first it just stung a little. Then I started to feel this weird numb cold up my arms and my neck. Then it just filled up the inside of my head. Worse for Lattrey. He got more on him. After a while we sat down. And they came and got us. Lattrey still had his knife in his hand when they picked us up and flew us into their nest. Fed us this jelly. Red, waxy stuff."

I remembered that jelly. Henry used to keep jars of it in his kitchen. Sometimes, when he was through working he'd have a taste. Then he'd sit down for a while and wouldn't say anything. But I felt all this pleasure coming off him, and one day when he'd gone out with Business Manager, I went into the kitchen and opened one of the jars. Inside was a packed down, reddish-gold paste. I put some on the tip of my finger and touched it to my tongue. And that was the last thing I remembered until I woke up in my bed with

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Henry crouched over me dabbing my forehead with a damp rag. I'd been out two days.

"I've had it," I said.

"Then you know what it does to you. I don't know how much they gave us, but by the time we came to we were different...seeing things their way. Like you do."

I felt my face getting red.

"Can't help it. Like being in love with somebody. You'll do anything for 'em. Drive a hundred miles to buy 'em shoes." Johnson looked up at me. "You're here to reverse the gas, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Won't do any good." He blinked his eyes. There were tears in them. "I really thought I was doing it, kid. Really kicking ass with that new story."

He finished what was in the bottle and threw it over the rail.

"Just sit back and enjoy the ride. It'll all be over soon."

I started forward toward the vent controls. Johnson raised a rifle.

"Uh uh. Can't let you do it, kid."

"You don't want to die, do you? Like this?"

"I want the bastards out of my head!"

The *Stella* shuddered and pitched forward. I went with the motion, tumbling into Johnson and knocking the rifle away. Now he was sobbing.

"George." I put my arms around him. "George, listen to me! Whatever happened to you in the war, it was already in your head when you wrote *East of the Moon.* You wrote it to warn people, and it was wonderful! So what's different now? Warn them again."

"Too old," Johnson said. "Not strong enough to kid myself anymore."

"Well, I am," I said, and went to the panel. He didn't stop me. Instead he was fumbling in his pocket.

"Wait, kid. Need these." He held out a handful of poppers. His eyes fluttered and I realized I'd been smelling gas all the time I'd been in the outer hull. I knelt down to get them, but blinding light hit my eyes.

"Zat will not be necessary, Guide Dog."

It was the Count. He didn't speak, but instead turned the light away from my face and shined it off into the vast empty space of the compartment. The beam spread, diluted by the darkness, but in the dim light, I saw fliers. Hundreds of them, sleeping upside down, suspended from the truss rings like

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bats. Lattrey moved the light across them almost lovingly. Then he pointed it straight down. On the guy wires and catwalks surrounding the field generator I could see the scattered bodies of fliers who had lost their grip. The bodies were smashed and twisted. It was hard to look at. Henry had looked like that in the end.

"One by one zey drop," Lattrey said. "I only wish ze ship would survive long enough for every one to fall!"

"You've been the one all along," I said. "You spread the book around. You put it over the p.a. You *wanted* the ship to break up!"

"It is ze only way I can save my homeland," Lattrey said.

"But the passengers — "

"It is Tansis I care about!" he cried.

I was really drowsy now. I needed a popper and made a move toward Johnson but the Count was too fast for me. Lattrey hit my hand and knocked all of the poppers over the rail into the darkness.

"All my life zey have me," Lattrey said. "I am ze eyes of ze Network on Tansis. Zey know everysing about us, because of me! Always, I try to fight against, try to kill myself, but zey stop me. Once I step in front of a tram. Zey pull me back. I can feel zem laughing at me, and I know zey will protect me always and keep me safe. I live a long life. I work, I grow old, I am thought to be ze greatest patriot, ze hero of ze resistance! And so when ze Network asks to begin peace negotiations, I am named ambassador.

"I cross to ze Tree. I meet ze representatives of ze Network. I forget all I know about zem. I am in contact with ze Network all ze time and do not even know it. I say to myself, I must negotiate carefully, I sincerely try to do all I can for my government, I arrive at a preliminary agreement zat is quite favorable in its terms. And all ze time, zey load zemselves into zis ship, and I help zem. So does Reverend Pennebaker. He too is under Network control. And I am to return home with zem and preside over the destruction of my world!

"Zen, as I prepare to leave, I receive delivery of a cylinder. A cylinder sent from ze *Stella* en route. Inside are copies of ze novel of George Johnson and a letter from me which explains everysing. I am horror-stricken, and destroy ze books. But I have sent off ozzers, dozens of zem, to passengers all over ze ship. Ze *Stella* leaves Haven carrying ze seeds of its own destruction.

"Still, zey have me. I try to steal all ze ozzer copies I can find. I alert ze

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ship's staff, and zey assist me. We almost succeed, but *you* have been affected too much by ze book. You live out its scenes and it is enough to cause ze ship to lost its balance. Ze first storm begins. Ze fliers, wis ze help of ze Network, calm us. It is difficult, however. Ze more zey must concentrate on ze ship, ze less hold zey have on me. Finally, ze strain is too much. I break free!

"I organize ze Proteus Krewe. All ze copies of ze book which I have confiscated, I put into cylinders and send to ze passengers, so zat all ze passengers will be afraid of a storm, *live* ze storm in ze novel. Ze panic begins again. It is strong. Ze ship turns over. Captain Pryzner calms ze passengers wis gas. I cannot let him succeed. Now I lead ze mutiny wis my krewe. We divert ze gas here. Ze fliers sleep. Ze storm begins again.

"You see, ze Network understands zare own group mentality. But zey do not understand ze *character* of ze group mentality among your people. Zey do not understand such violence and fear. It is because wis you, each person in ze mob tries desperately to escape ze mob. Everyone tries to escape its influence at ze same time, and so collectively, zey panic as one. Ze Network does not understand zis. For zem, each one is ze collective. Zey do not fight it. Zey fight *for* it. And so zey cannot understand how ze storm builds so quickly. Zey are helpless. And I am rid of ze Network for good!"

As he spoke, the *Stella* twisted, wrenching, tearing itself, as though it was a trapped animal trying to tear off its own skin. Lattrey lost his balance; I went for the control panel. I did not care about saving Tansis. I did not care about the fliers. All I knew was that I did not want to die. I had the manual control switch that Captain Pryzner had described in my fingers when the Count pounced on my back. I spun, trying to throw him off, but he was like a spider, and the weight of him, which normally I could have easily carried, drove me down to my knees. I knew then that the gas had almost gotten me.

"To die...for my homeland was all I ever wanted!" Lattrey gasped. He was choking me. My vision faded and dissolved and came back and I knew Lattrey was going to murder me and that the ship would break up. I felt myself slipping away, and I called Henry but he didn't answer.

That made me angry.

I turned myself around, got hold of the Count's arm and bit it as hard as I could. He yelled, and let go of my neck and I drove my legs forward and I reached the panel. This time I got the switch. I heard a hum, and the grind of a duct valve swinging inside its housing. But the Count wasn't finished yet.

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He pushed me away, and made for the switch. I dove between him and the housing, shoved him off. He charged, and I shoved him again just as the ship shuddered terribly. He caught the heel of his boot on the deck plating, fell back, and because he was so tiny, slipped between the bars of the rail. I heard him yelling all the way down. Then he didn't yell anymore.

I sat down. The *Stella* shrieked and moaned and I heard pieces of metal tearing free, and the ringing sound it made crashing into other metal. I closed my eyes, feeling...peaceful. Maybe I was heading for that Well of Souls, where Henry lived. Well, that's all right, Henry. I'll yell at you when I get there.

And after that I just let everything go.

FIFTEEN

I WOKE UP to a bobbing motion. A gentle up and down. I opened my eyes. I was lying on the maintenance platform. It was gently rocking. Looking straight across I could see the other side of the hull, and the wreckage of bent and twisted spars. The light was gray, filtered through the outside of the thin outer hull, and I could see the skin sagging in places. I turned and looked straight up. There weren't any fliers. I closed my eyes and concentrated and tried to pick up the Network, but there was nothing. I opened them again and

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remembered Johnson, but he was gone.

I got to my feet. I was very groggy from the gas. It was a long climb down the spars to the hatch landing. The ship swayed very gently. I went through the hatch, saw that the gangway had moved back to its mounting point and jumped warily across, the bridge shaking under my feet, and went out through the other hatch to the C deck.

There was a contingent of small people, men and women in dark blue tunics, bright red trousers tucked into polished boots, and mirror bright chrome helmets topped with gray and red plumes. They looked like little birds. Scattered along the corridor were various passengers wearing the wreckage of Mardi Gras costumes. I looked at one or two of them and saw they were breathing, but still out from the gas.

One of the little birds strutted up to me. He was a serious and sharp-eyed man. There was an orange tint to his skin and his teeth were stained ochre, like the Count's.

"What has happened here?" he demanded.

"There was a storm," I said. "Where are we?"

"Moored along the river Sont. You are in Tansis."

"How long?"

"The ship materialized last evening. Several minutes ahead of schedule. Fortunately the berth was clear."

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"You've got to search the outer hull," I said.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why must we search?"

"There are fliers aboard this ship."

The official gave me a scornful look. "Fliers? I assure you, M'sir, we have detected none."

"Was anybody watching the ship after it landed?"

"M'sir. Perhaps you have the mistaken impression that it is your place to ask questions. I am Chief Inspector Veray of the Tanisian Department of Customs, Sont Port of Entry. I will ask all questions!"

"There are fliers in the outer hull," I insisted.

Veray took another tack. More kindly, he said, "Perhaps you require medical attention."

"No, I don't."

"Then you will submit to a customs inspection!"

Veray led me over to a table that had been set up outside the entrance to the lift. A few people were beginning to stir on the deck, groaning and shaking themselves. We walked right over them to the officials at the table.

"Name?"

"GD," I said. "Or it may say Guide Dog."

He nodded. My name was on the passenger list. Next they asked me my age and the reason for my visit to Tansis.

"I'm a convicted murderer," I said. "I needed to get away for a while."

Apparently they had that information too. Behind me some of the passengers were starting to get to their feet. Immediately, other customs offices herded them into line behind me.

"What have you to declare?"

"Declare? There are injured people all over this ship!"

"Do you have anything to declare?"

"No."

"Step through ze scanner." He waved his pen and I walked through what looked like the frame of a guillotine. A bell rang very softly and the officer attending the machine perked up. She lived for this, I realized.

"Search him," the officer said.

She went through my pockets and pulled out the disk of *East of the Moon*. They knew what it was right away. They conferred excitedly a moment, then called over the commander of the detail.

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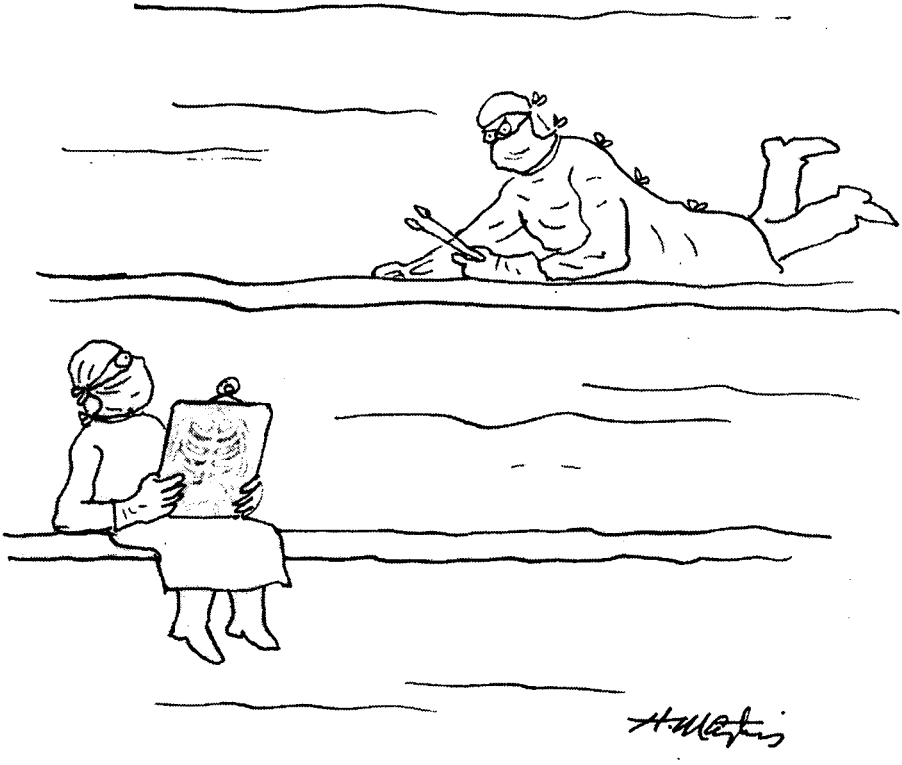
"You are in possession of a proscribed book. Were you not informed of the severe criminal penalties for smuggling this filth into Tansis?"

"You're going to have to arrest the whole ship," I said. And I started to laugh. After everything that had happened, *this* was almost too funny.

I was still laughing when they put the manacles around my wrists.



"I wish just once, Bergstrom, you and I could operate on the same wave length."

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

FINALLY WE can tell you about all the surprises in store in our anniversary issue. The October/November issue is a double issue with almost twice as much fiction in it as a regular issue. Last year's anniversary special received a lot of good critical attention — and a Hugo nomination for Best Original Artwork for **Ron Walotsky**'s cover painting.

This year's cover is just as spectacular. Hugo nominee **Thomas Canty** has provided a beautiful illustration of **Bridget McKenna**'s story, "The Little Things." In it, a small town suffers a bug-like infestation — of fairies.

Robert Reed, Jonathan Lethem, and **Allen Steele** provide some of the issue's science fiction focus. We'll also bring back this year's John W. Campbell nominee, **Carrie Richerson,** and a haunting story by new writer **Dale Bailey.** But the cornerstone of the issue comes from award-winning writer **Walter Jon Williams.**

In the long novella "Wall, Stone, Craft," Walter Jon takes on the Frankenstein mythos. He imagines a world in which the famous night of storytelling that inspired **Mary Shelley**'s tale did not happen, and takes us on an historical and literary alternate history adventure that has both drama and pathos.

The extra reading material in the anniversary issue should hold you through the fall until the arrival of December's magazine with a special cover story by **Harlan Ellison**. Future issues will include fiction by **Jack Williamson, Esther M. Friesner, Suzette Haden Elgin,** and this year's Nebula winner, **James Morrow.** So find the subscription blank on page 157 and fill it out. You'll celebrate that decision for the rest of the year.

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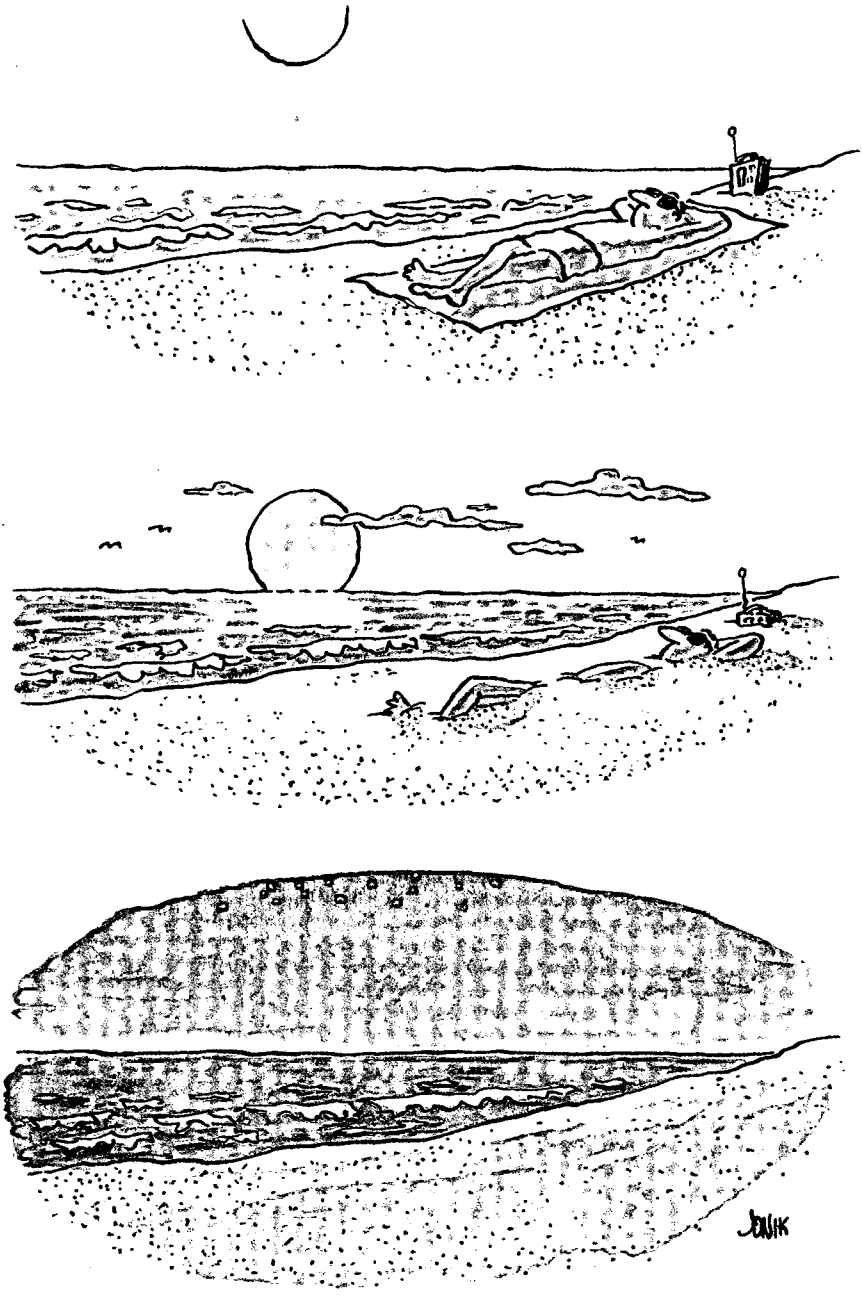

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